Horror in Culture & Entertainment
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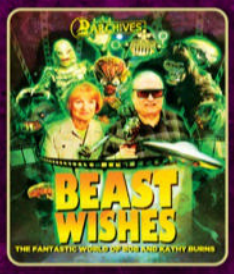

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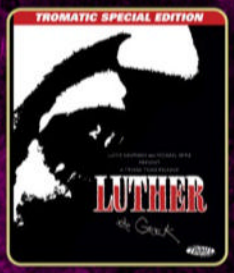

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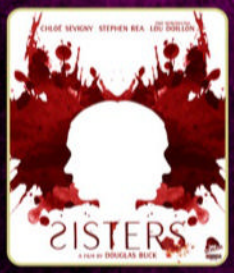

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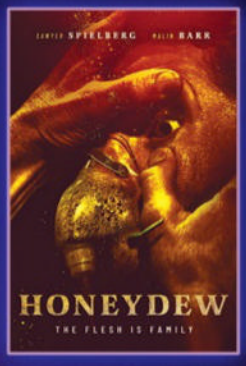

HONEYDEW

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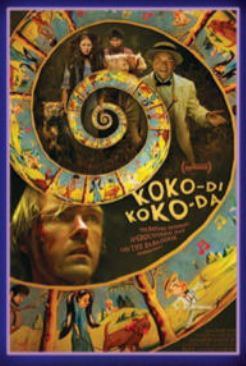


KOKO-DI KOKO-DA

SCAN ME

THE LAST MATINEE

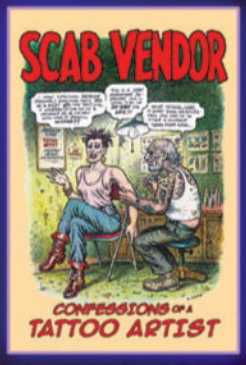
SCAN ME

T-BLOCKERS

SCAN ME

FAIR GAME

SCAN ME



SCAB VENDOR

SCAN ME

KING ON SCREEN

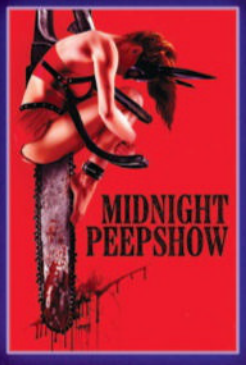
SCAN ME

TIGER STRIPES

COMING SOON

DAYDREAMERS

COMING SOON



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RUE MORGUE
JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2026 #228

12 HILLRAISER

He fascinated audiences in 2001 with the French period martial arts horror film *Brotherhood of the Wolf*. Then he followed it up in 2006 by bringing the eerie world of *Silent Hill* to cinematic life… and then he went dark. Now, visionary Christophe Gans returns to the director's chair with yet another nightmare.
PLUS! Gans' *Brotherhood of the Wolf turns* 25.
by **ANDREA SUBISSATI** and **MAGILL FOOTE**

20 DARKEST MIRROR
DOCUMENTING A SERBIAN FILM

Back in 2010, two angry young Serbs made what many consider to be the sickest film of all time. Now there's a film about it. Keep repeating: it's only a documentary… it's only a documentary…
PLUS! *A Serbian Film*'s co-writer directs his first feature, *Karmadonna*. Should we be afraid?
by **DEJAN OGNJANOVIĆ**

26 BRUT FORCE TRAUMA

French synthwave artist Carpenter Brut fuses retro horror with '90s rave music on *Leather Temple*, the final entry of his LP trilogy.
PLUS! A closer look at Carpenter Brut's *Leather* saga.
by **AARON VON LUPTON**

30 R.I.P. 2025: THE YEAR IN REVIEW

Rue Morgue revisits the highlights, the hits, and the defining events that made 2025 unforgettable. Here's our annual look back at what scared, surprised, and inspired us the most.
by **STAFF**

DEPARTMENTS

NOTE FROM UNDERGROUND 6
Clutching a Pearl Necklace

POST-MORTEM 7
Letters from fans, readers, and weirdos

THE CORONER'S REPORT 8
Weird Stats & Morbid Facts, Expiring Minds, Shadowland, and more!

NEEDFUL THINGS 10
Strange trinkets from our bazaar of the bizarre

CINEMACABRE 32
The latest films, featuring Aaron Pagniano and Zack Ogle's *It Needs Eyes*

REISSUED & REANIMATED 40
REVIVED: David Schmoeller's *Tourist Trap*

BOWEN'S BASEMENT 42
DUG UP: *The Victim* (1972)

THE GHOUL NEXT DOOR 44
ODDITY: When a Stranger Taps

BLOOD IN FOUR COLOURS 46
INKED IN: Bruce Brown's *The Cats of Ulthar*

THE NINTH CIRCLE 48
SPOTLIGHT: Sarah G. Pierce's *For Human Use*

THE FRIGHT GALLERY 52
ON DISPLAY: The Monster Kid Chronicles of Louie Becker

DEVIL'S IN THE DETAILS 54
CURIO: Crème de la Crap of Cozy Horror

AUDIO DROME 57
NOW PLAYING: Last Exit Radio

PLAY DEAD 60
FEATURING: *The Cabin Factory* and *A.I.L.A.*

VS 62
DEBATE: Is *A Serbian Film* still indefensible?

NOTE FROM UNDERGROUND

Full disclosure: I have been super stoked about *A Serbian Documentary* since Steve Biro told me it was in development a long-ass time ago. Why? Because I fucking love *A Serbian Film*, and I found myself wishing that I'd been in this position fifteen years ago so I could have put that shit on the cover and celebrated that film for all the reasons that still appear to go unsung. Some horror stories ripen with time, and some material needs room to breathe (or in this case, gag) before we can talk about it with a clear head.

Hear me out: I've been a horror fan long before I sat in this editor's chair, and I know it's impossible to talk someone into liking something that they don't. You can point out hidden merits, unconsidered perspectives, illuminate with context or what-have-you, but at the end of the day, it either tickles your pickle or it doesn't – and I respect that. What I *don't* respect, particularly when it comes to my cohort of entertainment journalists whose job it is to give an informed opinion and back it up by sensible means, is when something comes along that's so ugly that these same critics summarily slam the door of discourse and refuse to engage with it at all. That's not only bad journalism, it's fair-weather fandom.

Obviously, when it comes to horror fiction, we all have different boundaries. That line can even shift within a given horror fan's life – I know many new parents who can no longer handle violence toward children in film. I understand and respect why certain content has trigger warnings, and I love that the website "Does the Dog Die" [see *RM#211*] exists to help fright fans navigate those waters. But when I asked our writers if anyone wanted to take on a VS debate about *A Serbian Film*, I got surprisingly few takers – not because we don't have haters among our ranks, but few writers would even go there. One writer even said the best they could come up with for a 350-word argument as to whether or not the film was indefensible was simply writing "yes" 350 times.

Here, I find myself compelled to prove that I can talk rationally about my line-too-far, if only to avoid being a hypocrite in addition to an edgelord. Forgive me the ensuing crudeness, dear readers, but there are surprisingly few ways to refer to this particular phenomenon – I can't deal with cumshots in film. Graphic depictions of ejaculation are pretty rare in horror cinema, but when they do insult my black-rimmed retinas, something inside of me wants to throw up my hands and peace out. Piss, shit, puke, guts, gore, blood – all fair game for me, but the minute a pearl necklace is so much as *implied*? Bye, Felicia.

It so happens that the latest title to hit that beat appears in our R.I.P. 2025 list, Emilie Blichfeldt's *The Ugly Stepsister*. The movie is a totally bonkers twist on the Cinderella fairy tale, where we adopt the perspective of "ugly stepsister" Elvira, who is repeatedly, graphically, and (more-or-less) consensually mutilated in the name of conventional beauty. The movie contains some of the most brutal body horror I've seen in a long time – imagine Victorian-era rhinoplasty and surgically applied lash extensions and you're on the right path. It's incredible, and I was enjoying every minute until a sudden skeet sequence and then – *boom!* – I'm ready to turn it off. But turn it off I didn't, nor did I give in to the temptation to not think about it. Why did it belong in the film in the first place, and why does it trigger me so?

Interestingly, the answers to both questions are related. You see, I associate cumshots with pornography, and while most hetero porn is made for the male gaze, the money shot is an especially male gaze-y aspect of pornography – the release, the goal, the culmination of the whole encounter. I understand its use and value in pornography, and the more I thought about it rationally, the more I came to realize that this was exactly what Blichfeldt was using it for in a movie about the commodification/mutilation of female bodies to please the handsome (and perverted) prince. It makes sense to me now, and even if I never see *The Ugly Stepsister* again because of my aforementioned bridge-too-far, I've had the rare opportunity to pry open my psyche and understand it on a level that my gag reflex normally won't permit.

All this to say, the next time something crosses *your* no-no line to the point where you barely have words for it, resist the urge to hit the mental (or literal) eject button and do yourself (and the material) the courtesy of engaging with your discomfort. You might not be able to rationalize yourself into liking something you don't, but understanding is something we can all agree that the world needs more of these days.

ANDREA SUBISSATI
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Horror in Culture & Entertainment

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RUE MORGUE #228 would not have been possible without the valuable assistance of Alistair Graves, the Pineapple Pope, Eda Kumquat, Willow Catelyn Maclay, the Fogfreaks, Austin Griswold, and Al McMullan.

This issue is dedicated to the memory of Stuart "Feedback" Andrews, former staffer and forever part of the *Rue Morgue* family. 1968–2025. RIP

Cover: *Return to Silent Hill*
Design by Shane Mills

We acknowledge the land that *Rue Morgue* is created upon is the traditional territory of many nations including the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishnabeg, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee and the Wendat peoples and is now home to many diverse First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples.

Rue Morgue magazine is published bi-monthly and accepts no responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts, photos, art or other materials. Freelance inquiries can be submitted at Rue-Morgue.com.

Funded by the Government of Canada | Canada

RUE MORGUE Magazine #228 ISSN 1481 – 1103
Agreement No. 40033764

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POST MORTEM

COMMENTS • QUESTIONS • CRITICISM

THANK YOU for yet another amazing Halloween issue. I particularly enjoyed the material on lost horror films. This made me recall a long-standing hope for the release of a film that I never noticed grace the pages of *Rue Morgue*. *It Came From Trafalgar* boasts an all-star cast of horror legends, but was either never actually completed, or never commercially released. Is this film real and, if so, why is it never spoken of?

TONY WILLIAMS, VIA EMAIL

Hi Tony, It Came From Trafalgar *is indeed a real film – one that has only ever screened in 2009 at genre conventions across the U.S. As you note, it has never been released but we would love to see it! Any producers out there listening? -Ed*

JUST WANTED TO SEND along a couple of screen grabs of Horror Host Mr. Lobo of Cinema Insomnia showcasing your Halloween issue on one of his Twitch streams. Mr. Lobo has a small part in Paul Bunnell's *A Blind Bargain* film and he also filmed a documentary on the making of the film that will hopefully be on the Blu-ray, if not showcased elsewhere along the way. Mr. Lobo's birthday is in late November, so I sent him this issue as a gift. Myself being a fan of *Rue Morgue*, Mr. Lobo, and Paul Bunnell, it was amazing to see them all converge. Thanks to everyone at *Rue* for being who you are and for always being the best horror news source.

CHRIS THE GRUMPY PANDA – MARYLAND

ALWAYS MY FAVOURITE issue of the year, this little beauty had several highlights. Among them, the Lon Chaney Sr. article. Nice to see one of America's great horror stars get a big article in North America's finest horror-related magazine! Another was a shot from *Gargoyles*, still one of my favourites and one of the best TV movies ever! I still remember when it aired, a Tuesday night on CBS. I'll put this right up there with *The Night Stalker*! Thanks to everyone at *RM* for another great Halloween issue!

ROB MORGANBESSER – UPSTATE NEW YORK

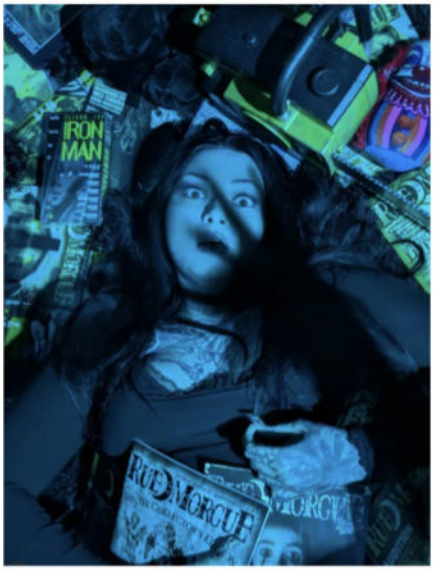

PHOTO BY @DARBYVALENTINES, VIA INSTAGRAM

JUST WANTED TO DROP a note that I always enjoy reading every issue and Andrea is doing a fantastic job as editor. I have been a lifelong horror fanatic, and I like how each issue delivers on the many fascinating topics that our genre encompasses. I look forward to learning about new films but always have a soft spot for classics. My favourite sections are the book and film reviews, but I also like the Weird Stats column. I like to glance through each issue and then slowly take my time reading from start to finish. Keep up the great work.

BRIAN PEDERSEN, VIA EMAIL

I'M A HORROR FILM FESTIVAL programming director and political activist in the U.S., in Pennsylvania. My goth aesthetic keeps smacking into my angry blue-haired liberal aesthetic and every day I keep wondering if I should make myself blend in better. You know, because I live in a hellscape with a deranged mango at the helm. Standing out right now feels as terrifying as it's ever been, and the last paragraph of your note made me ugly cry. If I am going to continue to be a voice, in both of these spaces, I'm going to continue to do it my own way. I'll keep reminding people that horror always has been, and always will be, political, and that these dual passions of mine aren't opposed to each other. You've been an inspiration since you became the executive editor, and since I began listening to the *Faculty of Horror*. Thank you for unintentionally giving me a much-needed moment of clarity this evening. Thank you for reminding me to find joy and that it's okay to be emphatically myself (while still fighting for what's right).

KARIS TURK, VIA EMAIL

RE: *TERROR TAROT* on *Rue Morgue TV – The Sentinel* is one of my favourite movies and one of my go-tos when I want to watch something that sustains a creepy haunting vibe from beginning to end. There is no comedic relief, and the birthday party scene for Jezebel the Cat is one of the all-time creepiest in horror cinema. The brownstone is still standing and located in Brooklyn Heights (my friends and I have taken pictures before) and looks exactly the same – sans ivy. I was surprised to hear you say that there is no tarot connected to this movie because, while there are no scenes involving tarot, you made solid connections with cards to characters and their roles in the story. Your episodes are both entertaining and thought-provoking, and educational for those of us interested in (but not knowledgeable in) tarot.

@SPENCERELLIS2672, VIA YOUTUBE

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CORONER'S REPORT

WEIRD STATS & MORBID FACTS

ISSUE # 228

The Fly's iconic tagline, "Be Afraid. Be Very Afraid," was suggested by producer Mel Brooks while he was discussing audience reactions to the character's transformation with director David Cronenberg.

The Chiodo Brothers based the look of the alien Crites from *Critters* on the Tasmanian Devil from *Looney Tunes* cartoons.

Doraphobia is described as an intense fear of touching animal skin or fur.

A Minnesota teen, found outside "frozen solid" on a cold winter's night in 1980, was successfully revived in hospital the next morning despite her pulse dropping to twelve beats per minute.

Danny DeVito directed a post-apocalyptic horror film in 2012 called *St. Sebastian*, starring William Fichtner and Lance Reddick. It was never released, and DeVito has not directed since.

In 2007, an employee at Denmark's Legoland amusement park was killed after being hit by the Xtreme Racers roller coaster while attempting to retrieve a guest's dropped wallet.

Daily consumption of microwave popcorn can lead to a condition called "popcorn lung," which is caused by the inhalation of diacetyl, an additive used for flavouring.

For his last meal, death row inmate Thomas Grasso ordered numerous items, including 24 mussels, six ribs, two milkshakes, and a can of SpaghettiOs. His last words were: "I did not get my SpaghettiOs, I got spaghetti. I want the press to know this."

During a 2020 raid of a cockfighting ring in the Philippines, one of the arresting officers was fatally wounded by a rooster's blade after it sliced through his femoral artery.

Emily's gory death in 1981's *The Beyond*, wherein her seeing-eye dog tears at her ear and throat, was envisioned as an ode to the phrase, "See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil."

Despite its bad reputation, fewer deaths and accidents are reported on Friday the 13th, possibly because more people tend to stay home on that day.

In February 2023, it was reported that two orcas named Port and Starboard killed and devoured at least seventeen great white sharks in a single day.

To help him portray *Silent Hill*'s imposing antagonist Pyramid Head, performer Roberto Campanella wore fifteen-inch heels that made him almost seven feet tall.

COMPILED BY JAY CLARKE
GOT A WEIRD STAT OR MORBID FACT?
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EXPIRING MINDS...

ON RUE MORGUE'S SOCIAL MEDIA

What rom-com needs to be redone as a horror movie adaptation and why?

Do society a favour and give *Pretty Woman* a *Frankenhooker* twist.
TYLER FLETCHER, VIA FACEBOOK

How about some cannibal hicksploitation: *When Harry Ate Sally*.
JAMES MAYSE, VIA FACEBOOK

Splash. Would like to see Tom Hanks and Daryl Hannah brought back as a carnivorous mermaid and merman (à la *Cabin in the Woods*).
@BLLYDDPAETWR, VIA INSTAGRAM

The Gary Cooper/Barbara Stanwyck comedy *Ball of Fire* (1941) about the encyclopedia author who stumbles into the world of nightclubs and gangsters, but shifted to the researcher who stumbles into the world of heretical books and cults.
JOEL SEGERBÄCK, VIA FACEBOOK

FINAL WORDS

AS CAPTIONED BY YOU ON OUR SOCIAL MEDIA

"WHEN THE SOURDOUGH STARTER YOU'VE BEEN NURTURING SINCE LOCKDOWN FINALLY GAINS SENTIENCE."

THIS MONTH'S CAPTION CONTEST WINNER IS
KIERAN SAN, VIA FACEBOOK
Follow us on Facebook, Bluesky, and Instagram for a chance to have your Final Words!

A NIGHTMARE SURFACES

It may not be the wildest news to learn that the United States doesn't have the best reputation in the international community right now, with two particularly noticeable valleys in confidence from 2016 to 2020 and then again since 2024 for some reason. But lest we think of this as a new development, it should be noted that the U.S. has a long history of actively pissing off its neighbours, near and far, with meddling military action and hazardous material spills. In fact, they pulled off both those feats at the turn of the millennium with an incident in Korea that inspired future Oscar-winner Bong Joon Ho to write his breakout film, 2006's *The Host*. Audiences may have watched the film's prologue, with a U.S. contractor dumping formaldehyde into the river that would go on to create the movie's aquatic monstrosity, and assume that an incident so brazenly stupid had to be fictional satire. But the truth is Bong really only changed the guy's name.

Albert L. McFarland was an American civilian working as the Deputy Chief of a mortuary on a U.S. military base in Seoul, South Korea. Citing lack of use, McFarland ordered his assistant Mr. Kim to dump 24 gallons of formaldehyde and methanol mixtures into the Han River. While the chemical dump didn't manifest a horrible fish creature, it did lead to Kim spending the next three weeks on sick leave due to his contact with the toxic substances, prompting him to alert the authorities. Unfortunately, the powers that be simply informed the Korean government that formaldehyde was harmless when diluted with enough water, and the case should be thrown out.

Naturally, the backlash against the U.S. inaction was immediate, with Korean workers voicing their anger and protests staged in front of the base. Their hand forced, authorities eventually indicted McFarland, sentencing him to six months in prison and a two-year work suspension. But by then the damage to America's reputation had been done, as a review of *The Host* from the *L.A. Times* noted, Bong's portrayal of the U.S. as baddies represented a significant shift in attitude from a country that had long been very pro-American. Not to worry, though – by the time *The Host* was released six years after the incident, McFarland was still listed as an employee at the base. USA! USA!

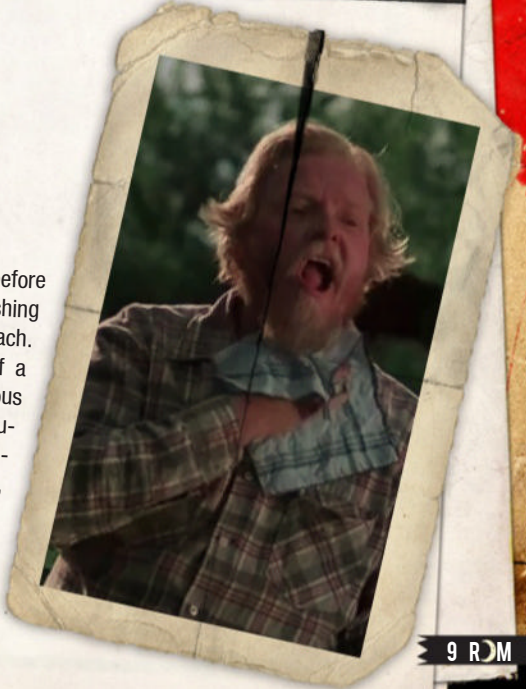
BRYAN CHRISTOPHER

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO...

Robert Easton, "Dan Kester" from *The Giant Spider Invasion* (1975)

Prior to starring in *The Giant Spider Invasion* as the lecherous farmer Dan Kester, Easton appeared in films and TV shows during the 1950s, but quickly tired of playing the perennial country bumpkin – a fate the actor had clearly not *entirely* escaped by the mid-'70s. Resolving to broaden his range by channelling a lifelong interest in speech mechanics gleaned from battling a severe childhood stutter, Easton studied phonetics at University College London in the 1960s. While there, he appeared beside Roger Moore in *The Saint* and provided voices for *Stingray*, before returning to America and establishing himself as a Hollywood dialect coach. Earning the moniker "The Man of a Thousand Voices," his many illustrious students included the likes of Laurence Olivier, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Gregory Peck, Robert Duvall, and Forest Whitaker. Easton died at his home in 2011.

LOUIS FLETCHER



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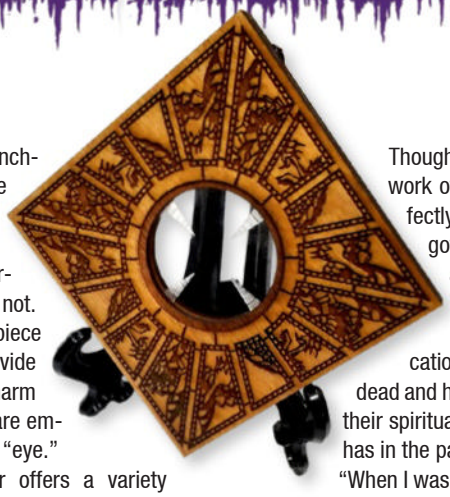
HANDMADE HORRORS

CRYPTIC CURIOS BY CHRISTOPHER



It's a common misconception that the word Ouija combines the French and German words for "hello." In reality, the spirit board named itself by spelling out the letters *O-U-I-J-A* in an 1890 session with medium Helen Peters Nosworthy. Las Vegas-based artisan Christopher of The Curio Shoppe takes a similarly spiritualistic approach to creating his own spirit boards and planchettes.

"I usually don't have a final design in my head," he tells *Rue Morgue*, "I let that evolve through a very organic and experimental process."

A seasoned occult practitioner in his own right, Christopher's fascination with divination started at an early age, bolstered by '80s horror flicks that featured the boards.

"I've always been drawn to Ouija boards, and similar mysterious things," he says. "I remember hearing a lot of urban legends when I was a kid, so I was always intrigued by them. I've made many boards for myself over the years and like having them around. They're great conversation pieces."

For the past ten years, the mononymous woodworker has created striking divination tools accompanied by a planchette, intended to glide across letters and numbers to reveal messages from spirits, both friendly and not. Each pine and birch piece is hand-stained to provide an aura of mystical charm while the planchettes are embedded with an acrylic "eye."

Though Christopher offers a variety of designs, many sets evoke a sinister feel, such as planchettes shaped like skulls or coffins, or boards emblazoned with frightening creatures from folklore and fiction.

"Horror and the occult are intertwined in our culture, with imagery often shared between them," he explains. "I try to make beautiful objects with macabre themes that can be collected, displayed or used."

Though each set serves as a work of art that would look perfectly at home in any elegant gothic setting, Christopher asserts that the Ouija board's primary function is to facilitate communication between the living and dead and hopes that his clients enjoy their spiritual potential as much as he has in the past.

"When I was younger, my friends and I used them often," he admits. "I have quite a few interesting stories from those times and have seen plenty of things I cannot explain. The question I get asked the most is 'Do they work?' I believe that they do."

Find Christopher's collection of spirit boards on Etsy by searching "CurioShoppeCo."

JENN ADAMS

CRYPTIC COLLECTIBLES

HAMMER HORROR MASTERPIECE COLLECTION PREMIUM MAXI-BUSTS

(Titan Merchandise, 2011-2013)

From the late 1950s to the early '70s, Britain's Hammer Film Productions was the master of gothic cinematic horror. The company's biggest stars – Christopher Lee and Peter Cushing – appeared together in numerous classics, and actress Ingrid Pitt would achieve fame by starring in two Hammer flicks. UK-based collectibles manufacturer Titan Merchandise paid tribute to these icons in 2011 by releasing a set of three highly detailed 8-inch polystone busts: Lee and Cushing from Hammer's *Horror of Dracula* (1958) and Pitt as the lovely but sadistic Countess Elisabeth Nádasdy from 1971's *Countess Dracula*. In 2013, Titan issued a bust of Cushing as Baron Frankenstein and Lee as his patchwork creation from 1957's *The Curse of Frankenstein*. The busts feature beautifully sculpted and painted figures atop a granite-like base adorned with the Hammer "H" logo, and each was limited to 1000 pieces – except for Dracula, which saw 1500 produced. The busts can fetch between $140 and $200 apiece on eBay.

JAMES BURRELL

MORE CRYPTIC COLLECTIBLES AT RUE-MORGUE.COM

HE FASCINATED AUDIENCES IN 2001 WITH THE FRENCH PERIOD MARTIAL ARTS HORROR FILM *BROTHERHOOD OF THE WOLF*. THEN HE FOLLOWED IT UP IN 2006 BY BRINGING THE EERIE WORLD OF SILENT HILL TO CINEMATIC LIFE... AND THEN HE WENT DARK. NOW, VISIONARY CHRISTOPHE GANS RETURNS TO THE DIRECTOR'S CHAIR WITH YET ANOTHER NIGHTMARE

HILLRISER

BY ANDREA SUBISSATI

IT WAS A YEAR INTO THE NEW MILLENNIUM, AND THE HORROR GENRE WAS LOOKING FOR NEW BLOOD. IT WAS FINDING IT IN THE FAR East, with an ever-evolving J-horror craze reflected in the release of Kiyoshi Kurosawa's *Kairo* (a.k.a. *Pulse*), Sion Sono's *Suicide Club*, and Takashi Miike's unforgettable *Ichi the Killer*. Closer to home was Alejandro Amenábar's European/American co-pro *The Others* and Brad Anderson's independent chiller *Session 9*. Shuffled in among these titles was a completely unique French-language horror film called *Brotherhood of the Wolf* by a new name on the scene: Christophe Gans.

A lushly produced and conceptually audacious film, *Brotherhood of the Wolf* is a genre-blending historical drama set in 18th-century France, where the hunt for a mysterious beast takes place amid political strife, civil upheaval, romance, folklore, and horror. With European power couple Monica Bellucci and Vincent Cassel among its cast, the film was a global hit, launching Gans and his inventive approach to practical effects and cinematography into the international spotlight (see sidebar, p.16).

"I HOPE THAT PEOPLE WILL UNDERSTAND THAT WHAT I PROPOSE IN *RETURN TO SILENT HILL* IS MY OWN INTERPRETATION OF THE GAME BUT MADE WITH RESPECT."

– CHRISTOPHE GANS

Dance Of The Damned: *True to the game and the precedent set in the first film, Christophe Gans'* ***Return to Silent Hill*** *is full of nightmare critters realized as practically as possible, using acrobats and dancers.*

Which made it all the more puzzling that it took the director six whole years to release his follow-up: *Silent Hill*, his first English-language film and horror movie proper. Based on the Konami video game and adapted to the screen by Gans and writer Roger Avary (*Pulp Fiction*), *Silent Hill* was a major release of 2006 and, even though it continues to divide audiences to this day, there is no doubt it established a high watermark for visual and monster effects that has stood the test of time.

Gans' name was absent from the credits of a sequel in 2012, and the film suffered for it. Then, after the release of the 2014 French-language romantic fantasy *La belle et la bête*, the director with so much promise vanished once again, this time seemingly for good.

However, as Gans reveals in the following interview, he certainly hasn't been idle – though he did run into some bad luck that kept him from a film set. That all changes this year with the February release of *Return to Silent Hill*, which not only marks Gans' return to the director's chair after eleven years, but also his return as the chief visionary of the franchise's adaptation into film.

First of all, where have you been all this time?
My last film was made ten years ago; it was *Beauty and the Beast* (2014). And then, I spent a lot of time prepping a movie called *Corto Maltese*. *Corto Maltese* is inspired by a very, very famous Italian comic book [by Hugo Pratt, 1967]. I was teamed up with my usual producer, Samuel Hadida, to do *Corto Maltese* and we were ready to shoot – the sets were built, basically. The problem is that Samuel died very suddenly, and he was a financial architect of the project. It was very difficult because all the owners of the rights of *Corto Maltese* were waiting for a long time for the movie to start [shooting]. And when Samuel died, they just cancelled everything. And then there was the pandemic. During the pandemic I wrote many scripts, including *Return to Silent Hill* and also an adaptation of another very famous horror video game franchise named *Fatal Frame/Project Zero*. And so the years passed like that, and finally I received the greenlight for a new adaptation of *Silent Hill.* So that's what happened. I never stopped working but I was basically, like, a retired director.

Why were you not involved in the* Silent Hill *sequel?

I didn't direct *Silent Hill: Revelation* because I was not exactly [in agreement] with what they wanted to do with the franchise. They wanted to push it toward *Resident Evil*; they wanted to make something like that. And I said no; *Silent Hill* is a very different kind of horror. It's much more psychological, it's a kind of atmospheric horror. And I was not [interested in doing] a more crazy *Silent Hill*. So, I decided to pass, and I had other projects, but I never stopped thinking about adapting *Silent Hill 2*, the second game, which actually was the fan favourite. After the pandemic, I met with Victor (Hadida, brother of Samuel Hadida) and we decided to go back to *Silent Hill* again.

What is the most difficult part of adapting* Silent Hill *into a film, and was it the same challenges as with the first?

[*Return to Silent Hill* had] very different challenges. When I was doing the first film, I was very much concerned with the recreation of the world of *Silent Hill* on the screen. For me, that was a big challenge. And I don't know if you know, but the first game and the second game are pretty different. The first game is almost like an adventure into a twilight zone. It's about people lost in a parallel dimension. *Silent Hill 2* is very different; much more on the ground of the psychological, like *Jacob's Ladder* or Polanski's *Tenant*. It's interesting because, actually, the second game betrays the first game. In the first game, *Silent Hill* [as a place] does exist. In the second game, it's a pure creation of a crazy mind. When I did the first film, I was yet a fan of the second game, but it was too difficult for me to achieve the world of *Silent Hill* and at the same time make this strange aura with different levels of perception. It was kind of too much. So

Dark Reflections: *Gans turned down directing* ***Silent Hill: Revelation*** *in favour of adapting the game's atmospheric sequel more directly, as a layered, metaphorical tale of madness, addiction, and abuse.*

yes, it's a very different type of challenge. The new *Silent Hill* is very different from the first film because we are inside the perception of somebody. Nothing is actually objective in the film.

So,* Return to Silent Hill *is more directly based on the* Silent Hill 2 *game, the one that was remade recently.
That's right, yes. The remaster.

How familiar are you with the games? You play them?
I play all of them! I'm a big gamer. It happened after the shooting of my first film, *Crying Freeman* – I came back to France, and my nephew was playing *Quake*, and I remember playing with him. It was during Christmas, and we played something like 40 hours, and I became completely addicted to video games. I remember I came back to Paris, and I bought a PlayStation and the first games I bought were *Tomb Raider*, *Resident Evil*, and *Silent Hill*. And that was done. I was hooked.

"THAT'S WHAT I LIKE ABOUT HORROR FILMS: WHEN THE IDEAS ARE SHOCKING AND STRANGELY ATTRACTIVE. I LOVE MONSTERS BECAUSE OF THAT."

– CHRISTOPHE GANS

A Haunted Heart: Return to Silent Hill *follows James Sunderland (Jeremy Irvine, right) on a surreal quest through nightmare realities to reunite with his beloved Mary (Hannah Emily Anderson).*

Have you played the new* Silent Hill*, the one that came out just last month?
Silent Hill f? Not yet. It's not released yet in France, but I saw that it was a huge, huge success. And I'm very pleased because I saw all the trailers, and it looks fantastic. I'm a big fan. We were talking about *Fatal Frame/Project Zero*, and I'm a big fan of the Japanese horror folklore. *Silent Hill f* looks very much like that, so I can't wait to play it.

In the first* Silent Hill*, there were a lot of prosthetics.* Return to Silent Hill *looks amazing, but it appears to be a bit more CGI.
No.

No?
No, it was the same amount. I think that the first film was praised because, basically, I used acrobats and dancers to play the creatures, and I did exactly the same thing [here]. I practice martial arts, and I started [my filmmaking career] with two action movies: *Crying Freeman* (1995) and *Brotherhood of the Wolf*. And I used to work with martial artists and dancers and, for me, it's the same thing. I do prefer to have the monster on the set, and I basically use CGI just to accentuate proportion or things like that. I'm a big fan of makeup, I'm a big fan of what the human body can do on screen. For me, Buster Keaton is immortal because he's really doing what he's doing. And Jackie Chan, same thing. The hero of my childhood was Bruce Lee, so I'm completely into that idea that human body is the ultimate frontier. I love CGI, of course, because it's an interesting tool, but I actually like to do as much as I can on the set and then I go to the CG. I love what we can do with the human body. I think it's great to be surrounded – for example, when I was doing all the nurse sequences – by 50 dancers; that was amazing. It's part of the pleasure I can have doing this type of film. It's fantastic. I used the same choreographer I used on the first *Silent Hill*: Roberto Campanella, the guy who was playing Pyramid Head. Roberto Campanella is also a choreographer for Guillermo del Toro, and that's great. I like to go to the rehearsal and see all the people dancing, doing this crazy chorus line of nurses right in front of me. I mean, that's great.

***I thought the nurses were stop-motion in* Return to Silent Hill.**

Cont'd on p.18

WITH MONSTERS, MARTIAL ARTS, POLITICAL INTRIGUE, AND REAL FRENCH LOCATIONS, *BROTHERHOOD OF THE WOLF* DEFIED LABELS. LOOKING BACK 25 YEARS LATER, CHRISTOPHE GANS REVEALS HOW THAT DEFIANCE BECAME THE FILM'S GREATEST STRENGTH

WHERE THE BEAST ONCE ROAMED

BY MAGILL FOOTE

IN THE 18TH CENTURY, THE MOORS AND MOUNTAINS OF SOUTH-CENTRAL FRANCE WERE TERRORIZED BY A SERIES OF ATTACKS from a creature no one could identify. Original accounts of the Beast of Gévaudan described a monster quite unlike any fauna native to the area – a hulking animal larger than a cow with dark stripes along its sides and back, enormous claws and teeth, and the ability to leap (or even fly, according to some) at incredible speed. Having attacked literally hundreds of people over a span of several years only to disappear without a trace, the mysterious beast was primed for cinematic adaptation, and that came in the form of Christophe Gans' *Brotherhood of the Wolf*, which brought the tale to the big screen in 2001. The film celebrates its 25th anniversary this year, and there has never been a better time to revisit those ghosts.

"The film was a very strange hybrid when it was released," remembers Gans. "But [since then], we have seen so many hybrids, very interesting hybrids, especially from India, such as [S.S. Rajamouli's 2022 Telugu-language epic] *RRR*. It's why maybe the film has not aged so much, because it has the kind of spirit that the people of today expect from big global entertainment."

Brotherhood of the Wolf follows French cryptozoologist Grégoire de Fronsac (Samuel Le Bihan) and his Native American friend Mani (Mark Dacascos) as they venture to the Gévaudan province to investigate the killings, only to discover that the beast's true nature is formed by the very nobles who claim to be terrorized by it. With elements of historical fiction, period romance, political conspiracy, the occult, mystery, horror, and martial arts, the film is as difficult to classify as the cryptid at its centre – and just as dangerous.

"[*Brotherhood*], for me, was not only a monster movie," says Gans, "it was also a secret personal remake of a *wuxia* film [historical fantasy/martial arts genre] from China named *The New One Armed Swordsman*, a movie by Chang Cheh made in 1971. When I was doing *Brotherhood of the Wolf*, I was not saying [my inspiration] to anybody except the choreographer of the film, Philip Kwok, who was actually one of the actors found by Chang Cheh."

It was a bold swing at the time, as most multi-genre films are notoriously challenging for sale and distribution without an easy category to describe them. But Gans' willingness to play with genre boundaries isn't the only factor to which he attributes the film's lasting impact. He also felt that shooting in real places would fill his film with details and minutiae beyond what was possible on a set, making every room feel lived-in and authentic. He credits his director of photography, Dan Laustsen (whose other notable cred-

its include Guillermo del Toro's *Frankenstein* and *Crimson Peak*), who perfectly captured the gorgeous locations the production visited throughout the French countryside.

"The film was entirely bio, made in real castles and real forests," explains Gans. "There was only one scene shot on set: it was a sequence in the cellar where the beast is catching the guy and bumping him against the wall. Except for that scene, everywhere you saw in the film was actually real."

The image of Gans and his crew prowling the French woods in search of the home of the beast recalls the protagonists of the film, joining a massive hunt for the monster, surrounded by mercenaries specialized in all different kinds of combat. True to form, the affable director praises his crew for bringing the period world of *Brotherhood of the Wolf* to life – a singular achievement that has served the film well throughout its 25-year history.

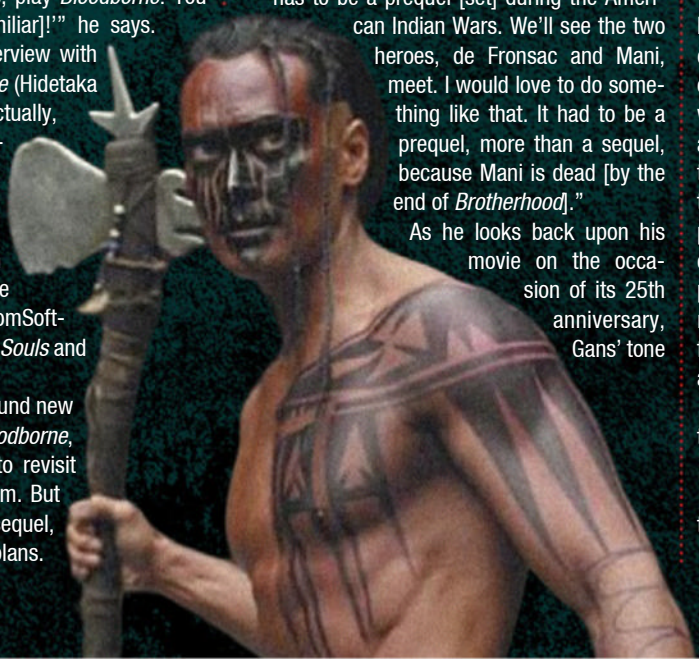
"I'm surrounded by very talented people," he says. "They help me to achieve a vision which is sometimes even more spectacular than what I can imagine. That's the people that I call my 'Praetorian Guards.' That's the people I like. They are very, very close friends. We are not collaborators, we are friends."

Like the legend of the beast, *Brotherhood of the Wolf*'s legacy has endured. Although it continues to hold the record of being the sixth highest-grossing French-language film in the United States, it may be better known these days as the principal inspiration for the popular 2015 video game *Bloodborne*. While *Bloodborne*'s plot is much more supernatural than *Brotherhood*'s, the visual style is unmistakably similar, filled with Gothic architecture, monsters, elaborate combat, and tricorne hats. Gans, himself an avid gamer (or couldn't you tell from his love of *Silent Hill*?), was delighted to see his work reflected in a game from one of his favourite studios.

"A friend of mine who did all the artwork on *Beauty and the Beast* was the first one to call me and say, 'Christophe, play *Bloodborne*! You will see something [familiar]!'" he says. "And then I saw an interview with the creator of *Bloodborne* (Hidetaka Miyazaki) saying that actually, yeah, he took his inspiration from *Brotherhood of the Wolf*, and I'm very pleased. It's an honour to have inspired such an artist like him, because I'm a big fan of all the FromSoftware games. I love *Dark Souls* and *Bloodborne*!"

With the film having found new relevance thanks to *Bloodborne*, the time may be right to revisit *Brotherhood* in some form. But when asked about a sequel, Gans says he has other plans.

Monster Mashup: *A visionary blend of historical fiction, period romance, martial arts, and horror,* ***Brotherhood of the Wolf*** *remains a singular cinematic achievement.*



"Plenty of people came to see me after the big success of *Brotherhood of the Wolf* to ask me to do a sequel," he says, "but I was saying no, it has to be a prequel [set] during the American Indian Wars. We'll see the two heroes, de Fronsac and Mani, meet. I would love to do something like that. It had to be a prequel, more than a sequel, because Mani is dead [by the end of *Brotherhood*]."

As he looks back upon his movie on the occasion of its 25th anniversary, Gans' tone becomes nostalgic, and he begins to sound more and more like the film's narrator reflecting on the passage of time.

"The [cast] is played by a lot of important French actors of older generations and new generations at that time," he reflects. "Now most of these people have passed away, so for me watching the film is something very emotional and important. This film is like a testimony of their talents. It was very spectacular casting for the French audience to see all these different people because they were all very, very successful. Most of them accepted to be just a small part, just to have the fun of being in this big crazy movie about the beast. Today when I watch the film, I see all these amazing faces and remember all these moments that I spent with them."

He adds, smiling: "Cinema is made of ghosts; that's what I think is the most fascinating aspect of the cinema – the fact that it's made by [real] people and even if they are dead since a long time, their spirits are in the image."

"PEOPLE ARE NOT DEAD IN CINEMA; THEY LIVE ON."

– CHRISTOPHE GANS

No! What we did is we altered slightly the movement [speed] to create this kind of broken movement. But this kind of broken movement [was in] the choreography, we just accentuated that in post-production. I'm also using a certain body type, you know – very thin people who can actually enter into the complete makeup suit and stuff like that. But no, the new *Silent Hill* has as many practical effects as the first one, and I was very, very much into that. Sometimes I had to fight with the producer because, of course, the producer does prefer to use CG because it pushes everything into postproduction. Me, my pleasure is actually seeing the things in front of my eyes; it makes a big difference. And I do realize that [throughout] all these years, people remember the first *Silent Hill* fondly. And I realize that people were crazy about the fact that we used dancers on the first film. I think that that was a very good thing. It's funny because on the first film, it was done to save money. Producers were very happy that we were doing [it that way] but then on the second one, [practical effects] were done for heart, because the producer was constantly saying, "Oh, why don't you do that with CG?" And maybe [it's because] I'm an old guy. I'm pretty conservative, and I do like to remember that some of the great moments I prefer in the cinema are done by a guy, and not a [computer-generated] effect.

So, in working on* Return to Silent Hill*, what was the tension between trying to please fans of the first film and trying to please fans of the game?

It's not a problem, but there is always tension between satisfying the whole film crowd and satisfying the people who love the video game. The best judge for that is actually myself, because I'm a gamer and I'm a cinephile. Before being a director, I was a journalist like you, I was a film critic. So, I think that, in my mind, I [aspire] to combine these two types of audiences. I understand perfectly as a gamer, because I [poured] so many hours into *Silent Hill* with earphones on, playing and being completely immersed in this strange, beautiful world. I understand that [fans of the game] don't want somebody to come and fuck up everything. But at the same time, I'm working very closely with Akira Yamaoka, the producer and composer and one of the main creators of the game. He was with me constantly, and I could feel when he agreed [with me] and I could feel when maybe I could do better.

Also, I'm following what the people of Konami – the producer of the game – are telling me. Sometimes they'd ask me to, for example, redo some of the designs during preproduction. And I was okay [with that], you know, because I never forgot that *Silent Hill* is not my [creation], I'm just a fan who has this incredible honour to put it on screen. But I'm not the creator. I'm just somebody who tried to take this creation and propose it in a different medium, the cinema. I never forgot that that's my [role]. And [that I] need to be very fond of the original material and be very humble with it. But by luck, as I say, I had Akira on my side and, for me, that was the main thing. The first guy who actually saw the first edit of *Silent Hill* was Akira. It was very important that the first impression that I had of what I had done was coming from one of the creators of the game.

I know that fans of the game [understand] my respect for the game but, at the same time, it's impossible to imagine that the film will be the exact reproduction of the game. It's impossible. So sometimes I have to adapt things from the game, and I try to do it and [believe] that I'm doing it right simply because I'm a fan, and I know deeply what the meaning of *Silent Hill* is. That's important, because *Silent Hill* is a pure symbolic creation; everything is symbolic in *Silent Hill.* [You don't need to] constantly understand the meaning of what you're seeing. You constantly have to reinterpret what you're seeing in the game, so that's something import-

ant that I had to respect in doing the film. Let the people interpret what they are seeing in the film, exactly like they constantly are looking for the meaning of what happens when they are playing the game. That's not easy.

I had a long, long talk with Akira Yamaoka where, for example, I was asking him what some detail means, you know? And sometimes, I was proposing my own interpretation, and he was saying, "Oh, that's interesting. Okay, yeah." Because we all know as soon as you play *Silent Hill*, every gamer will have a different idea of what happened in *Silent Hill* and especially in *Silent Hill 2*. I hope that people will understand that what I propose in *Return to Silent Hill* is my own interpretation of the game but made with respect.

Going back to how you used to be a magazine editor, how does that background inform your filmmaking?

I learned cinema by watching film since I was very young. I went to a cinema school in Paris when I was eighteen but then I became an editor and publisher of a magazine which had a big success, named *Starfix*. Many French critics became directors, especially the people of the Nouvelle Vague, you know, like [François] Truffaut and [Claude] Chabrol and [Jean-Luc] Godard. They were all critics before they became directors. So, it's like a tradition in France; it's not weird to be first a critic and then a director. I know that in America, that's weird because it's like two tribes. It's funny because when I was prepping *Crying Freeman* in Los Angeles back in 1994, I was living in a condominium just above a very famous Los Angeles critic. And we met together, and I said, "Yeah. I'm a critic," and he was very friendly. And then suddenly, he asked me, "But why are you here?" "Because I'm prepping a film." And he became suddenly very distant. It was funny. I was really shocked by the reaction. As long as I was critiquing, in his eyes, I was okay. But when I said that I was creating a film… okay, over.

Do you still feel the exact same way about the world of cinema as a filmmaker as you did as a journalist?

Of course not. Because when you're crossing that line, suddenly plenty of things become very, very real. But at the same time, personally, I love films because when I'm looking at films, I hope to have [a sense] of the people who did the film. I'm a big cinephile, and I like to [wonder], who was Hitchcock? Who was Fritz Lang? Who was John Ford, you know. These people are dead long ago, but I'm still searching for who they were through their creations. What is interesting is the people who are doing films. Films are great, but they are great simply because you feel the people behind [them]. And when I was a journalist, I met so many amazing directors like David Lynch, especially. And now that he's dead – and it was a shock when he died – I watch plenty of his films again, and he is still here. I can feel him. I do remember I did an interview with him, and I remember this guy with this very soft voice, you know, talking like a priest. And he's still there. And that's what I like [about] cinema. People are not dead in cinema; they live on. Directors and all the people behind the camera, they are not dead. They are still there.

Do you have a favourite creature from the new film?

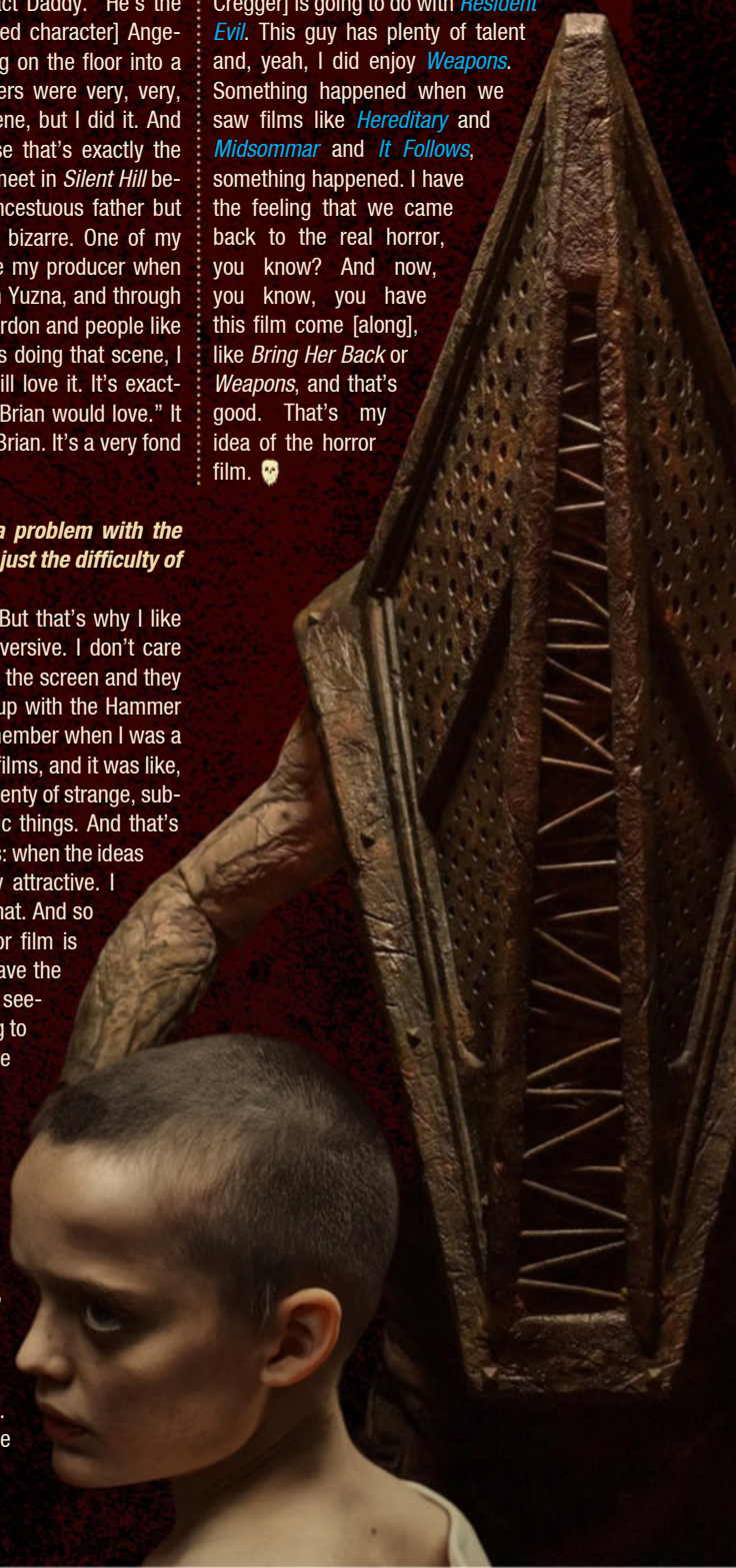
Yeah, I think that's "Abstract Daddy." He's the incestuous father of [doomed character] Angela. He's a mattress crawling on the floor into a room of flesh. The producers were very, very, very worried about that scene, but I did it. And I like this monster, because that's exactly the kind of monster we like to meet in *Silent Hill* because that's basically an incestuous father but the shape he [takes] is so bizarre. One of my [close] friends who became my producer when I did my first film was Brian Yuzna, and through Brian Yuzna I met Stuart Gordon and people like that. And it was when I was doing that scene, I was thinking, "Oh, Brian will love it. It's exactly the type of monster that Brian would love." It was great fun to work with Brian. It's a very fond memory for me.

Did the producers have a problem with the incestuous undertones or just the difficulty of shooting the creature?

[It was] the meaning of it. But that's why I like fantasy film: it's super subversive. I don't care when you see a monster on the screen and they mean nothing. Me, I grew up with the Hammer films back in the '60s. I remember when I was a kid, seeing all the Hammer films, and it was like, wow, because there were plenty of strange, subversive, transgressive, erotic things. And that's what I like about horror films: when the ideas are shocking and strangely attractive. I love monsters because of that. And so my conception of the horror film is actually an old concept. I have the feeling that recently we are seeing a new trend of film trying to go back to a subversive type of horror. For example, the last film by the Philippou brothers, *Bring Her Back*, that's my favourite horror film of the year. That film is exactly what I'm expecting from horror film. It's amazing. I was deeply, deeply shocked by that film, but that's great! I mean, seeing a horror film is not [necessarily] uncomfortable. It can be fun but, at the same time, you need to feel the electricity. And when I was seeing *Bring Her Back*, you know, I was saying, "Oof!" That's what I prefer. I prefer [something like] *Bring Her Back* to [something from] Blumhouse.

Have you seen* Weapons *yet?

Oh yeah, of course, that's a great film. I was a fan of *Barbarian* because when you're watching *Barbarian*, you don't know where the [next] blow is going to come [from]. During the first half hour, I was like, "Okay, what's going to happen?" And that's great. And I can't wait to see what [Zach Cregger] is going to do with *Resident Evil*. This guy has plenty of talent and, yeah, I did enjoy *Weapons*. Something happened when we saw films like *Hereditary* and *Midsommar* and *It Follows*, something happened. I have the feeling that we came back to the real horror, you know? And now, you know, you have this film come [along], like *Bring Her Back* or *Weapons*, and that's good. That's my idea of the horror film. 💀



BACK IN 2010, TWO ANGRY YOUNG SERBS MADE WHAT MANY CONSIDER TO BE THE SICKEST FILM OF ALL TIME. NOW THERE'S A FILM *ABOUT* IT. KEEP REPEATING: IT'S ONLY A DOCUMENTARY... IT'S ONLY A DOCUMENTARY...

DARKEST MIRROR

DOCUMENTING A SERBIAN FILM

BY DEJAN OGNJANOVIĆ

Fury Without A Filter: *Director Srdjan Spasojević insists that his audacious directorial debut "denounces the fascism of political correctness."*

A *SERBIAN FILM* IS ONE OF THOSE MOVIES WHICH, FOR BETTER OR WORSE, ONCE SEEN CANNOT BE UNSEEN. When it came out, some loved it, many hated it, but few were calmly twirling their thumbs somewhere in between. Many diehard horror fans detest its very synopsis and refuse to see it to this day, preferring a sort of second-hand hate. And yet, whether considered an exercise in depravity, shock for shock's sake, or some kind of valid metaphorical statement – muddled for some, crystal clear to others – the beast just refuses to die.

No list of the most shocking, controversial, and transgressive films made since the turn of the millennium is complete without *A Serbian Film*, and its title often occupies the number one spot. The 2010 film continues to thrive, not only in blackly humorous memes and on horror buffs' social media lists, but also in academic papers that analyze its various subtexts and themes. Their titles are telling: "Serb Your Enthusiasm: Anti-fandom and *A Serbian Film*," "Film as Rape Culture: The Ethics of Aversion in Srdjan Spasojević's *A Serbian Film* (2010)", "Newborn-Porn and the Wannabe Art Film of the Future," and "'Welcome to the Reality Studio': Serbian Hand-Held Horrors" (that last one's by yours truly).

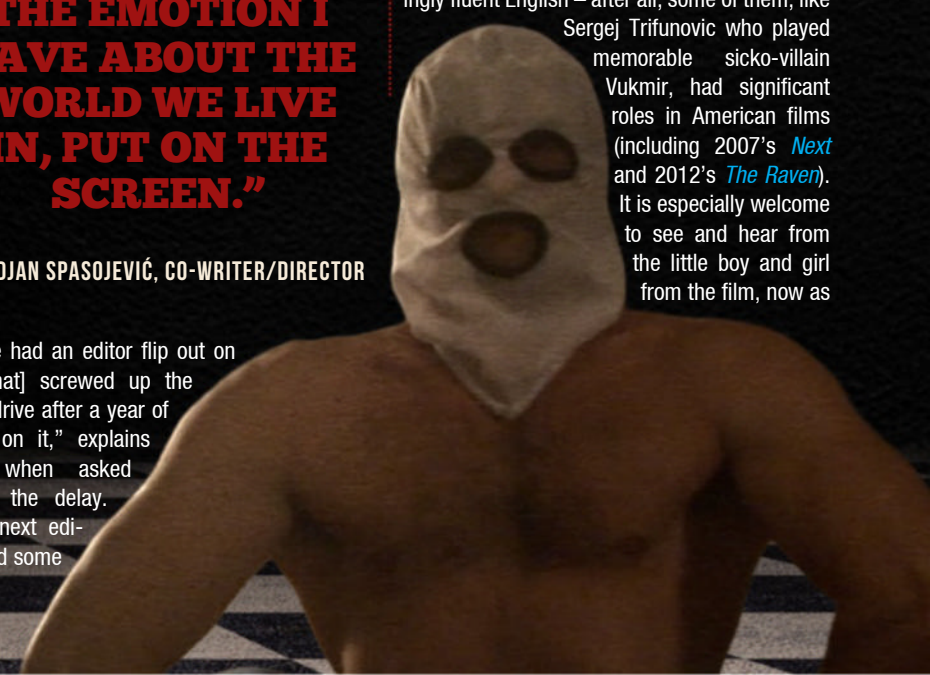
The latest entry to the list is *A Serbian Documentary*, which premiered in genre festivals in late 2025 but is only now becoming widely available from Unearthed Films, ready to reheat the debate. Directed by Stephen Biro, head of Unearthed Films (and director of two *American Guinea Pig* entries, see *RM#203*), *A Serbian Documentary* is far more ambitious and accomplished than your usual talking heads Blu-ray supplement. It's a proper feature-length doc, culled from over 162 hours of exclusive behind-the-scenes footage, and it features all new interviews with cast and crew. Originally announced for 2021, the documentary was intended for release on the heels of Unearthed's *A Serbian Film* Uncut Blu-ray. Yet here it is, fresh as a baby, more than four years after its expected term.

"A SERBIAN FILM IS NOT THE LIST OF MY SEXUAL DESIRES, BUT THE EMOTION I HAVE ABOUT THE WORLD WE LIVE IN, PUT ON THE SCREEN."

– SRDJAN SPASOJEVIĆ, CO-WRITER/DIRECTOR

"We had an editor flip out on us [that] screwed up the hard drive after a year of work on it," explains Biro when asked about the delay. "The next editor had some problems because he knew what we were expecting and didn't think he could do it. We lost edited footage, a year or two's worth, from simply not backing it all up [and] the interviews took a bit to set up. I found an editor, Caleb Emerson, who did an amazing job and put it together, and my personal tech guy from Unearthed, David Hood, did a final polish with graphics and sound design. We knew that we had to hit this out of the park, so to speak. I would rather work on something for five years to make it as perfect as I can than put out an inferior product. We're talking *A Serbian Film*! It has to be the best of the best that we are able to do."

Indeed, *A Serbian Documentary* contains enlightening talks with all the major cast, in surprisingly fluent English – after all, some of them, like Sergej Trifunovic who played memorable sicko-villain Vukmir, had significant roles in American films (including 2007's *Next* and 2012's *The Raven*). It is especially welcome to see and hear from the little boy and girl from the film, now as



young adults, reminiscing about the playful and innocuous filming, whose wider context they were carefully protected from. Behind-the-scenes footage reveals a professional filmmaker who made everything look like a game and a playful set, filled with cheerful Serbs whose recent history taught them to smile even in the face of the blackest tragedy.

That laconic attitude – laced with a sense of black humour – is what helped these men and women survive their country being torn apart in civil wars under UN sanctions and NATO bombings. The same attitude is abundantly evident among them in sets splattered with "untrue blood" (as one bit actor endearingly calls it), fake body parts, and dummies for corpses. But it was not all child's play, as the creators of *A Serbian Film* lucidly articulate.

In the doc, director and co-writer Srdjan Spasojević says that, before *A Serbian Film*, he was naive and that the film was "born out of a kid's belief that you can do anything." It is clear that he no longer views things from such a perspective.

"When using the word 'naive,' I was referring to a kid's point of view, free of any knowledge of the obstacles and bureaucracy along the way, just sole existence of your vision and your will to follow it," Spasojević tells *Rue Morgue*. "I was referring to the belief that you should follow your instincts, make no compromises; the belief that art should have no boundaries (as long as you're not breaking the law), and the belief that a good film can find its own way to the audience without big marketing escapades and budgets, with just a little word of mouth. So, naive means honest! What did I learn? A lot has changed since the time we were making *A Serbian Film*. Political correctness was at its peak and now, after its victory, we have auto censorship implanted in our brains along with the mantra 'less is more.' So, a kid's way is better! That's what I've learned."

True to his stubborn roots, when asked if he had any regrets making *A Serbian Film* and if, transported back in time, he'd do anything differently, Spasojević remains obstinate.

"No regrets," he says, adding, "but with time travel, I would do it tougher, more ruthless, and better!"

Art of Shock: A Serbian Documentary *takes audiences behind the scenes to show how many of the challenging SFX sequences were achieved.*

"WE HAVE MANAGED TO ACHIEVE SOMETHING RARELY ACCOMPLISHED – WE UNITED SERBIA... AGAINST OURSELVES."

– ALEKSANDAR RADIVOJEVIĆ, CO-WRITER

Unsurprisingly, his sentiment is shared by *A Serbian Film*'s co-writer, Aleksandar Radivojević, whose own directorial debut, *Karmadonna*, made the festival rounds last summer and is currently awaiting wide release (see sidebar on p.23).

"It was the right and honest thing to do at the time, at least from our perspective," he says of *A Serbian Film*. "I don't think the film would work as well if it was softened or tuned down a bit. That legacy can be a burden in theory, when people would expect the exact same thing as a follow-up. But a lot of time has passed, and [my new film] *Karmadonna* is out there now. I didn't notice people complaining about it being less transgressive."

Still, *A Serbian Film*'s notoriety did negatively impact the filmmaking careers of its creators.

After its release, Spasojević was invited to direct a segment in the 2012 anthology *The ABCs of Death* ("R is for Removed") before falling off the radar.

"Very often, in talks with U.S. producers who reached out and wanted to work with me, I saw their problems with deciding how to promote me or how to convince their partners to engage with me, and all that because of the burden (for them) of *A Serbian Film*," he says. "On the other hand, there is always a way you can find to do your thing. In my case, that would probably be independent (if that still exists) and low-budget projects."

It was a similar situation for Radivojević: he wrote a couple of plays that were performed in the theatre, and both seasons of the Serbian occult horror TV series *Crna svadba* (*Black Wedding*, 2021-2025), but his countless pitches to foreign producers would ultimately prove unsuccessful.

"*A Serbian Film* effectively stopped my filmmaking career for a while," he admits. "We have managed to achieve something rarely accomplished – we united Serbia... against ourselves. Abroad, the notoriety certainly brought us fame and recognition, but it also caused trepidation of hiring us. We were temporarily unbackable."

The irony, of course, lies in a key aspect of *A Serbian Film* that remains commonly misunderstood, although it was signalled in lurid neon lights in its very title: namely, that it was a meta-film, a cinephile's meditation on filmmaking. As Radivojević remarks in *A Serbian Documentary*, the movie was based on "wishful thinking about where the American films of today should go. It was born out of our frustration at being unable to make the kind of films we wanted to make in our native country."

Also, somewhat ironically, Serbian audiences mostly hated *A Serbian Film* due to its title. Were it called something more generic, they wouldn't have cared less about all the bloodshed, incest, snuff, necrophilia, and even the notorious newborn porn. It was associating the content with their already much-maligned country's image that was deemed unforgivable. Adding yet another – this time, domestic – brick in the sizeable wall of Serbia's bad press was basically considered an act of treason. But foreign audiences had their own stumbling blocks to surpass in order to properly understand *A Serbian Film*.

"Many people didn't detect the level of humour, the satire in the film," Radivojević

A SERBIAN FILM'S CO-WRITER DIRECTS HIS FIRST FEATURE. SHOULD WE BE AFRAID?

BORN AGAIN, BLOOD AGAIN

BY DEJAN OGNJANOVIĆ

THE LINGERING CURSE OF *A SERBIAN FILM* IS MANIFOLD. FIRST, THE FILM'S NOTORIETY SLOWED DOWN THE CAREER OF ITS co-writer, Aleksandar Radivojević, because no one wanted to finance his next project. Then, after fifteen years of unsuccessful attempts, when he finally debuted as a director, everyone kept comparing his movie to *A Serbian Film*. People wondered where the man who conceived "newborn porn" would go next. As it turns out, *Karmadonna* is more explicitly satirical and blackly humorous, while its gore, shocks, and transgressions are a fair bit more palatable.

The plot is jump-started by a phone call from an entity identifying itself as God, who blackmails the pregnant Jelena (Jelena Djokic) to go on a killing spree guided by Him – or else risk the fate of her unborn child. The ensuing overnight odyssey through Serbian society's underbelly includes a possessed boy brutally smashing his own forehead in, another turned into a vicious genital-stabber, an infant in danger of being turned into pulp (once literally, under a heavy black boot), not to mention dozens of adults being burned, slashed, shot, and dismembered. The nature of the caller's mission is as bloody as it is ambiguous, leading some audience members to be puzzled once again: what was the point?

Radivojević, writer and director of *Karmadonna*, is ready for his *Rue Morgue* close-up.

What was your main ambition with* Karmadonna*? What were you striving to achieve?

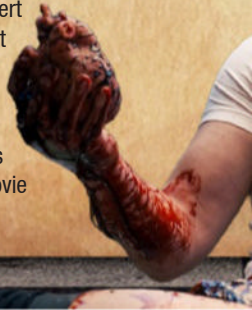
It is a very personal film, but it deals with the global nightmare we all live in. On the other hand, it also tackles issues of religion, motherhood, family, procreation, and snuffed creativity under corporate control in a pretty flamboyant and perverse fashion through the slightly offbeat vision of my own. The title is kind of a pun, a deliberate wordplay on "Karma" and "Madonna," which unifies Buddhism and Catholicism in an "unholy" alliance against the corporate realm that has hijacked the notion of divinity for its own sinister purposes. It is basically my own take on the Bible from the era of corporate globalism. But it is also a love story.

How would you describe it in terms of genre?

At the most basic level, it is an action thriller with supernatural overtones, but it is also a black comedy. Then the whole horror aspect jumps in. On the other hand, it is a manic "rant" movie with philosophical layers in it, just like the ones Andrzej Żuławski used to make. So, if Żuławski made a bizarre buddy action movie for producer Joel Silver during the '80s or '90s, I think it would be very similar to *Karmadonna* – that's what I was striving for. Imagine if *Possession* and *Lethal Weapon* or *Die Hard* had a bastard child, and this could be it.

There is much more humour and significantly less brutality and bloodshed than in* A Serbian Film*. Was this a conscious decision?

This is, tonally, a more overt black comedy, like I said, so it required a lighter touch when it comes to brutality. *A Serbian Film* was an intentional downer, and *Karmadonna* is actually a pretty uplifting movie



"IF [ANDRZEJ] ZULAWSKI MADE A BIZARRE BUDDY ACTION MOVIE FOR PRODUCER JOEL SILVER DURING THE '80S OR '90S, I THINK IT WOULD BE VERY SIMILAR TO KARMADONNA."

—WRITER/DIRECTOR ALEKSANDAR RADIVOJEVIĆ

in the end, at least from my own warped perspective. It certainly ends with hope, even if it isn't the kind of hope you were hoping for.

You're no stranger to controversy, provocation, and divided opinions. Have you met many of those regarding* Karmadonna*?

All of the official reviews so far were pretty enthusiastic and friendly, I am certainly happy with that. But, at one of the Toronto International Film Festival screenings, during the end credits, a woman came to me, said "Fuck you!" and left. We didn't have that with *A Serbian Film*! I am really curious what triggered her so much. When you take the satirical approach, you are inevitably going to piss a lot of people off, especially these days when everyone is so easily "pissable." When it comes to user comments online, opinions are very divided – I think I've managed to antagonize the Gen Z-ers somehow. It has a lot to do with the humour – if they don't gel with it, they immediately yell "Cringe!" I think it was never safer to do a self-serious, humourless film than right now, as the laughs have strangely become the dividing factor. Also, the problem they might have with me is that they think I am "the old man yelling at clouds," but they are wrong – this is the film about the old man yelling from the clouds, he is the main character! So, all the complaints should go to Him, not me.

What's next for you?

I have a new thing in the works as we speak – it is about quiet censorship and Satan, and it will be much more overtly a horror film than *Karmadonna*. But still with a bit of satirical edge to it.

From Set To Scandal: A Serbian Documentary *is culled from over 162 hours of behind-the-scenes footage, and features new interviews with cast and crew.*

laments, "because it was so ferocious. I think the main thing the Western audiences didn't get is from which dark corner of our mind all that horror, piss, and vinegar came from and why it was unleashed at all. It came from our inability to work and create in our native environment, which brought both the anger and the satirical aspect – we were viciously trolling state-sponsored Serbian mainstream film production. People out there [i.e. non-Serbian audiences] don't know much about our domestic film production – and I'm not blaming them. But there lies what triggered us to make the film that we made. When you look at it now, *A Serbian Film* works perfectly as an entirely appropriate satire of liberal capitalism in Eastern Europe, or most parts of the third world."

As for Spasojević, the director states that he's "not a fan of" analyzing public perception of his art, but that he did experience some memorable encounters from festival interactions, panel talks, and coincidental encounters with fans and detractors.

"NO WONDER THEY MADE A FILM THIS VISCERAL AND SHOCKING."

– STEPHEN BIRO, DIRECTOR, *A SERBIAN DOCUMENTARY*

"First, they appreciate realizing that I do not have horns, a tail or gushing blood from my body," he jokes. "Second, they quickly welcome a patient and civilized explanation that the film is not the list of my sexual desires, but the emotion I have about the world we live in, put on the screen. I honestly feel like that, and I have admitted it and painted it. Hopefully the documentary will do something similar."

Biro, for his part, commits to capturing the entire sordid story with surgical detail and a determination to furnish fans with a forensic autopsy of one of the most shocking films ever made. Doing so, he says, was a painstaking task that took no less than five years to complete.

"Srdjan did a lot of work on the behind-the-scenes, and so did I, not being able to speak Serbian at all," he says. "I would get excited over [the footage of] what looked like drama on set, but as it would turn out, they were complaining about a cheeseburger or a soccer match and Srdjan would laugh at me. The hard part was subtitling it all. I pulled all of the best behind-the-scenes shots, had five and a half hours of material, cut it down to four and a half... then cut again to three hours and thirteen minutes. Srdjan and I went over it all, made the subtitles, and that is what we cut from to make the documentary."

Ultimately, *A Serbian Documentary* provides numerous perspectives from which both novices and seasoned fans can (re)view the film with fresh eyes. If nothing else, it is bound to enrich one's understanding of the background – personal, political, aesthetic – which gave rise to such an extreme work. Even superfan Biro came across new perspectives.

"All of the actors love Serbia but have problems with the present government and such – what happened with the wars and what they went through," he says. "It's exactly what [actress] Jelena Mihic says in the doc: 'They fuck you when you're born, they fuck you when you're alive, and they fuck you again when you're dead.' Heartbreaking stuff, to be honest. No wonder they made a film this visceral and shocking."

FRENCH SYNTHWAVE ARTIST CARPENTER BRUT FUSES RETRO HORROR WITH '90S RAVE MUSIC ON *LEATHER TEMPLE*, THE FINAL ENTRY OF HIS LP TRILOGY

BRUT FORCE TRAUMA

BY AARON VON LUPTON

WHEN FRENCH SYNTHWAVE ARTIST CARPENTER BRUT (COMPOSER FRANCK HUESO) FIRST MADE HIS APPEARANCE NEARLY fifteen years ago, he introduced himself through a two punch that combined horror movie soundtracks and heavy metal with his electronic music. The band immediately set itself apart by mining the synth-heavy horror soundtracks of John Carpenter and Goblin and processing them into dark, ferocious bangers so intensely aggressive that the sound almost fit better at an extreme metal show than a dance club. Now, Carpenter Brut returns with *Leather Temple* on Hueso's imprint No Quarter Prod this February, marking the conclusion to a trilogy of albums that also includes *Leather Teeth* (2018) and *Leather Terror* (2022), where '80s teen movie clichés, serial killer horror, and post-apocalyptic warfare are funnelled into what has become a signature synth sound.

From the beginning, Hueso decided that he wanted people to focus solely on the music and not on the man making it, so he created his moniker by fusing famed *Halloween* director John Carpenter's name and French champagne Charpentier Brut (known these days as Tradition Brut). A synthwave creature made up of equal parts a Dario Argento movie and the bands Justice and Kreator, Carpenter Brut makes music that might come from a retro horror movie you've never seen… and there's good reason for that.

"Horror movie scores figure very little in my music in concrete terms," Hueso tells *Rue Morgue*. "I rely on memory, and memories trigger emotions that are easier to turn into music. If I listen to too many scores, I get influenced and risk copying them. I prefer listening to things far from what I compose, as it gives me unexpected ideas to inject."

As Carpenter Brut, Hueso released three EPs between 2012 and 2015, an era that produced a number of tracks that have become modern classics, including "Le Perv" and "Roller Mobster." Beyond the bangers, Carpenter Brut also released a series of electrifying music videos that skyrocketed its popularity. While many bands struggle to produce visuals, Carpenter Brut's high-concept videos could outclass the majority of submissions at an indie film festival. "Le Perv" combines the grainy aesthetic of an early '80s grindhouse shocker with an over-the-top, sexed-up workout video. Another, "Escape from Midwich Valley," functions as a nine-minute short film based on H.P. Lovecraft's *The Shadow Over Innsmouth*.

As the overture to his concept trilogy (see sidebar), Carpenter Brut issued *Leather Teeth* in 2018, which provided Hueso an

opportunity to showcase his love for '80s glam metal and British heavy metal acts Judas Priest and Iron Maiden. During the tour, Carpenter Brut appeared on stage with additional musicians on guitar and drums to further imitate a "real" band. *Leather Teeth* was steeped in '80s neon; if it were a movie soundtrack it would fall anywhere between *A Nightmare on Elm Street 4* and *License to Drive*.

The 2022 follow-up, *Leather Terror*, aimed to bring a heavier, darker feel as the album's narrative delved into slasher movie territory, necessitating a more violent sound. Still a predominantly synth-based album, Hueso added guitar, drums, and bass this time, creating the vibe of black metal brutality along with pummelling electronic beats. Appropriately, Hueso invited guests to participate in some of the songs, notably Dillinger Escape Plan vocalist Greg Puciato, black metal band Ulver, and Converge guitarist Kurt Ballou. All of which set the stage for the trilogy closer.

"[LEATHER TEMPLE] STAYS IN THE LINEAGE OF THE FIRST TWO RECORDS, BUT IT IS MORE MODERN, FULLY INSTRUMENTAL, AND ANCHORED IN THE '90s."

– FRANCK HUESO

Future Kill: *Glam metal, cyberpunk, and electronic adrenaline collide in the hypervisual world of Carpenter Brut.*

"I went for something more electronic this time," says Hueso of the newest album. "*Leather Teeth* was glam rock. *Leather Terror* was industrial metal. Now *Leather Temple* has more of a Chemical Brothers or The Prodigy energy. A strong '90s atmosphere, but with a movie score layer that is probably more present than ever."

And while it can't exactly be said that *Leather Temple* is a soft release, it has the distinction of being Carpenter Brut's first album to be crafted mostly with electronic atmospheres as opposed to horn-throwing metal.

"I do not know if metal fans will connect, but they are more open-minded than people think," says Hueso. "As long as the energy is there, they will enjoy it. The album feels more massive though; the production is better. The mix was done by [sound engineer] Thibault Chaumont who is much more skilled than me. After so many years doing everything alone, it was time to hand that part to someone better."

The new album also marks a new focus on somewhat more traditional song structures instead of music that is peppered with effects and sound clips. Hueso says that this time out, he focused on his computer instead of building a stack of synths.

"I used Ableton 12 [software], Arturia [synthesizer], and the usual plugins – nothing extravagant," he reveals. "I focused on melodies this time and less on sound experiments. I wanted memorable songs. When you have vocals, everything hangs on the top line. But I work without vocals, so melodies must do the job. I used a lot more organ this time, helped by [French pianist] Gérald Villain who handled the symphonic parts. It stays in the lineage of the first two records, but it is more modern, fully instrumental, and anchored in the '90s."

There is a kind of anxiety and tension that cuts across *Leather Temple*'s nine tracks, from the creepy and ominous "Ouverture," to the high-stakes wasteland vehicle chase of "Start Your Engines." With its pulsing '90s beats and hypnotic electronic retro industrial stomp, *Leather Temple* calls to mind the likes of James Cameron and Paul Verhoeven: grandiose like a Hollywood film and rocking like a futuristic robo-battle.

Even so, Hueso insists that there was no particular film or soundtrack that influenced his writing and recording on the new album. It is always more about the music than any movie.

"I leaned more into electronic tracks," says Hueso of his writing process. "Like if Junkie XL influenced me, it is because of [1999 album] *Big Sounds of the Drags* rather than his *Mad Max: Fury Road* soundtrack. I did pay a small tribute to Vladimir Cosma [Romanian composer who worked predominantly in France] on the last track, "The End Complete," which is the most cinematic of the album. Through him, I also pay tribute to the French musical identity, which has its own flavour in this field."

Another of the album's future world themes is transhumanism, which seems fitting for such an intensely high-tech album. *Leather Temple* might just be a soundtrack to the next step in human evolution that, in Hueso's opinion, is heading into a second dark age.

"People are getting dumber," he says mat-

ter-of-factly. "They live at full speed because of apps like TikTok. They do not take time for anything that lasts more than 30 seconds. They are more hateful, more polarized, and always ready for conflict. With AI, many will lose their jobs. In France we spent years mocking manual work while glorifying office jobs. Those office jobs will be the first to disappear. We will still need plumbers; we will not need secretaries. It will hurt in the coming years, everyone knows it. We are heading straight into the wall. Good luck to all of us."

No surprise to hear that, while Carpenter Brut is not known as a particularly politically motivated artist, Hueso cites George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is one of the only books he's ever read.

"It is still a huge influence," he says. "It is still completely relevant."

This March, Carpenter Brut kicks off a new international tour across Europe and North America, bringing his neon-soaked live show to arenas, replete with a mind-melting stream of horror and B-movie imagery – in an experience that has to be witnessed. Ironically, Hueso never actually wanted to play in front of an audience until the demand became so great that he was forced to rise to the challenge. And if he was going to do it, he had to do it as massively as possible.

"I will bring horror visuals back, in a more graphic way," he promises. "I am still working on the stage design, but there will be clips from the new tracks, probably older ones too. It feels right to close the trilogy by revisiting the roots. So, the show will be a mix of every visual era of Carpenter Brut."

As the international synthwave scene continues to grow, Carpenter Brut shows no signs of relinquishing his place on the top of the mountain. Even so, Hueso understands that in today's world of rapidly changing technology and tastes, any success is volatile.

"Trends appear and die faster than ever," he says. "What was true on Monday becomes irrelevant on Wednesday. But I am doing fine; I see that shows are filling up, people are happy to see me back on stage and they want to have fun. I will tour a lot in 2026 and early 2027, probably as much as in 2018. I hope this album connects with people too. It is exciting, like every release. Synthwave is still a niche, especially the darker and more violent side. Bands like The Midnight, who invited me on their album, are leading the genre, but their synthwave is much friendlier than mine. I am a bit like Joe Dante and they are Steven Spielberg."

CARPENTER BRUT'S *LEATHER* SAGA IS A TWISTED TALE TOLD THROUGH GLAM METAL, SLASHER TERROR, AND DYSTOPIAN SCI-FI

HIGH SCHOOL TO HELLSCAPE

BY AARON VON LUPTON

***LEATHER TEETH, LEATHER TERROR, LEATHER TEMPLE*... THE STORY THAT RUNS THROUGH CARPENTER BRUT'S CONCEPT TRILOGY ISN'T WELL UNDERSTOOD, GIVEN THAT IT DOESN'T OFFER MUCH IN** the way of lyrics, but it's a vital component of the albums. Instead of writing music to accompany an imaginary film, Franck Hueso has conceived of a narrative to accompany (or perhaps guide) his instrumental albums.

Drawing from teen movies of the 1980s, *Leather Teeth* (2018) introduces the trilogy's protagonist, Bret Halford (a combination of Poison's Bret Michaels and Judas Priest's Rob Halford), who is a nerdy guy who strikes out with girls. Naturally, he's obsessed with lead cheerleader Kendra (who, of course, prefers the high school quarterback) and concocts a potion that would allow him to control them. Unfortunately, Bret hideously disfigures his face in the process of creating the potion. Still determined to win Kendra's affections, he becomes Leather Teeth, frontman for the glam rock band Leather Patrol. Carpenter Brut's album-long homage is informed by '80s hair metal and is therefore lighter than what was to come.

Leather Terror (2022) was the follow-up, which expanded Bret's story into the horror genre after Bret – still lead vocalist of Leather Patrol – decides to take revenge on all those who humiliated him in high school. But Kendra cleverly turns the tables on him, and the album ends with Bret frozen in time. Carpenter Brut ushers listeners into what is essentially the soundtrack to an '80s slasher film, from "Opening Title" through to bloody scenes of stalking and killing on tracks such as "Day Stalker," "Night Prowler," and "Color Me Blood."

Which brings us to this year's *Leather Temple*. Set in 2077, the new album introduces leader of the rebellion Lita Connor (a combination of Lita Ford and Sarah Connor) to the story. She locates Bret, thaws him out, "upgrades" him, and turns him into a weapon built to crush Iron Tusk, the tyrant who controls Midwichpolis. Inspired by *Blade Runner* and *Mad Max*, *Leather Temple* is the fitting post-apocalyptic soundtrack to the end of Bret's story.

"SEVERIN FILMS HAS REDEFINED THE PERIMETERS OF CULT-THEMED BLU-RAY BOX SETS."

Tim Lucas, Video Watchdog

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R.I.P. 2025

THE YEAR IN REVIEW

From unexpected hits to long-awaited anniversaries, this past year has been full of noteworthy moments that continue to push the genre in new and exciting directions. Before we turn the page on a new year, let's revisit the highlights, the hits, and the defining events that made 2025 unforgettable. Here's our annual look back at what scared, surprised, and inspired us the most.

BEST FEATURE FILM
WEAPONS
Zach Cregger
Warner Bros.

BEST FIRST FEATURE
THE UGLY STEPSISTER
Emilie Blichfeldt
Shudder

BEST INDIE FEATURE
DANGEROUS ANIMALS
Sean Byrne
IFC Films

GORIEST FILM
FINAL DESTINATION: BLOODLINES
Zach Lipovsky and Adam B. Stein
Warner Bros.

STANDOUT PERFORMANCE:
AMY MADIGAN AS AUNT GLADYS
Weapons

BEST SHORT FILM
LOOK CLOSER
Tyson Edwards

BEST TRAILER
KEEPER

MOST ORIGINAL CONCEPT
GOOD BOY

MOST LIKELY TO START A LONG-RUNNING FRANCHISE
HEART EYES

BEST DOCUMENTARY
STRANGE JOURNEY: THE STORY OF ROCKY HORROR
Linus O'Brien
Kaleidoscope Film Distribution

BEST QUEER REPRESENTATION
QUEENS OF THE DEAD
Tina Romero
IFC Films/Shudder

BEST SPECIAL EFFECTS
BRING HER BACK

BIGGEST DISAPPOINTMENT
28 YEARS LATER

BEST BLU-RAY/DVD PACKAGING
THE BROOD
Second Sight Films

MOST WELCOME REISSUE
FREAKED
Drafthouse Films/Umbrella

BEST SCORE
SINNERS
Ludwig Göransson

BEST ALBUM
SAD WITCH CULT
Lonesome Wyatt and the Holy Spooks
Tribulation Recording Co.

BEST MUSIC REISSUE
PHANTASM
Waxwork Records

BEST SPECIAL EDITION VINYL
JAWS
Mondo/Universal/Amblin Entertainment

BEST ALBUM ART
THE REVENGE OF ALICE COOPER
Graham Humphreys

BEST VIDEO GAME
SILENT HILL F
Konami Digital Entertainment

BEST INDIE GAME
DECK OF HAUNTS
DANGEN Entertainment

BEST ONGOING COMIC BOOK SERIES
BENEATH THE TREES WHERE NOBODY SEES
Patrick Horvath
IDW

BEST LIMITED COMIC BOOK SERIES/GRAPHIC NOVEL
MARY SHELLEY'S FRANKENSTEIN STARRING BORIS KARLOFF
Kerry Gammill
Legendary Comics

BEST NOVEL
KING SORROW
Joe Hill
HarperCollins

BEST NON-FICTION BOOK
SCREAMING AND CONJURING: THE RESURRECTION AND UNSTOPPABLE RISE OF THE MODERN HORROR MOVIE
Clark Collis
1984 Publishing

BEST ANTHOLOGY BOOK
WITCHES AND WITCHCRAFT: AN ANTHOLOGY OF STORIES, POEMS, AND ESSAYS
Katherine Kerestman and S.T. Joshi, eds
Hippocampus Press

BEST SHORT STORY COLLECTION
MIDNIGHT SOMEWHERE
Johnny Compton
Blackstone Publishing

BEST ART BOOK
THE BASEMENT TAPES
VS Press

BEST POSTER
TOGETHER
Bangers & Mash

BEST TREND
LIMITED THEATRICAL RERELEASES

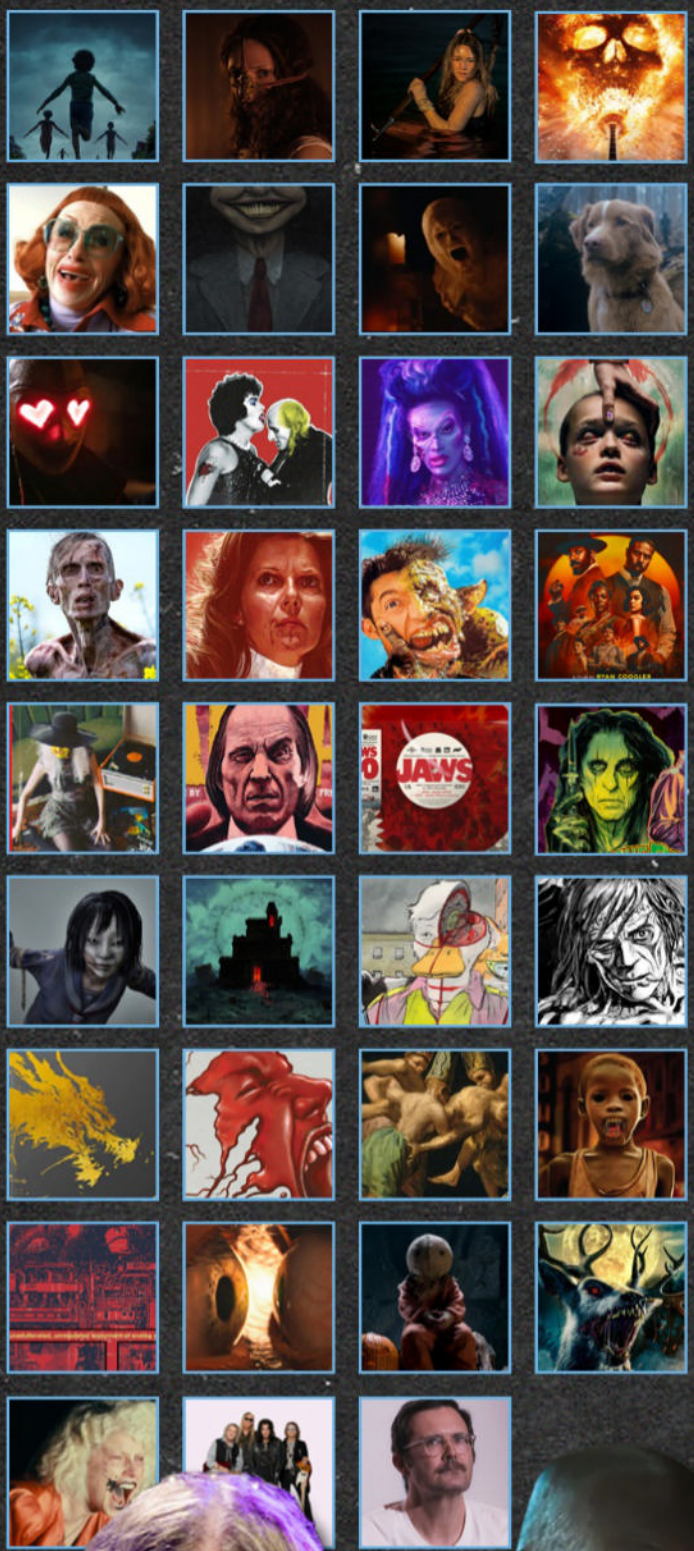
WORST TREND
PUBLIC DOMAIN CHARACTER HORROR FILMS

MOST ANTICIPATED IN 2026
THE BRIDE!

MOST WELCOME COMEBACK
THE ALICE COOPER BAND

SHEER VOLUME AWARD
OSGOOD PERKINS

CURTAIN CALL OF THE YEAR
TONY TODD
Final Destination: Bloodlines
TIED WITH
OZZY OSBOURNE
Back to the Beginning Benefit Concert



HUNT, KILL, REPEAT

REDUX REDUX

Starring Michaela McManus, Stella Marcus and Jeremy Holm
Written and directed by Kevin McManus and Matthew McManus
Saban Films

When you hear that *Redux Redux* is about a woman repeatedly wreaking revenge on her daughter's murderer over multiple alternate realities, you might imagine it'll be another horrific variation on *Groundhog Day*. Instead, writer/directors Kevin and Matthew McManus confound expectations and deliver a consistently surprising and gripping experience.

Redux Redux, coming to theatres February 20, is more comparable to *The Terminator*: a ground-level thriller that incorporates sci-fi tech and terror trappings with an unerring real-world grit. It also has a similarly compelling female protagonist: Irene Kelly (Michaela McManus), who has gotten hold of a device that allows her to jump through a multiverse that's a far cry from the one seen in Marvel movies. Irene navigates a series of working-class California environments seeking out Neville (Jeremy Holm), the serial killer who claimed her daughter. It's a bloody quest for vengeance that she's completed hundreds of times but has brought her no inner peace. She hopes to find a timeline where her daughter is alive, but instead, she encounters teenager Mia (Stella Marcus), who becomes her timeline travelling companion and a potential light in the darkness of her existence.

There are plenty of tense and thrilling moments in *Redux Redux*, from a terrifically well-staged car chase to the heart-gripping climax. Yet the soul of the movie is the interplay between Irene and Mia, two women whose circumstances have left them adrift and driven toward revenge, and who might be each other's best hope for retaining their humanity. The leads keep us fully invested throughout, as McManus conveys Irene's grief and sense of purpose with glimmers of hope for redemption, and Marcus, making an impressive feature debut, is a perfect, spiky foil. Holm, fast becoming one of indie horror's most dependable talents, provides a genuinely fearsome threat.

Modest in means yet big in ideas and emotion, realized with top-notch production values, *Redux Redux* announces the McManuses (who previously delivered the eerie mood piece *The Block Island Sound*) as genre talents deserving of a bigger showcase.

MICHAEL GINGOLD

PASS THE CRONENBERGS

WHISTLE

Starring Dafne Keen, Sophie Nélisse, Sky Yang and Nick Frost
Directed by Corin Hardy
Written by Owen Egerton
Shudder

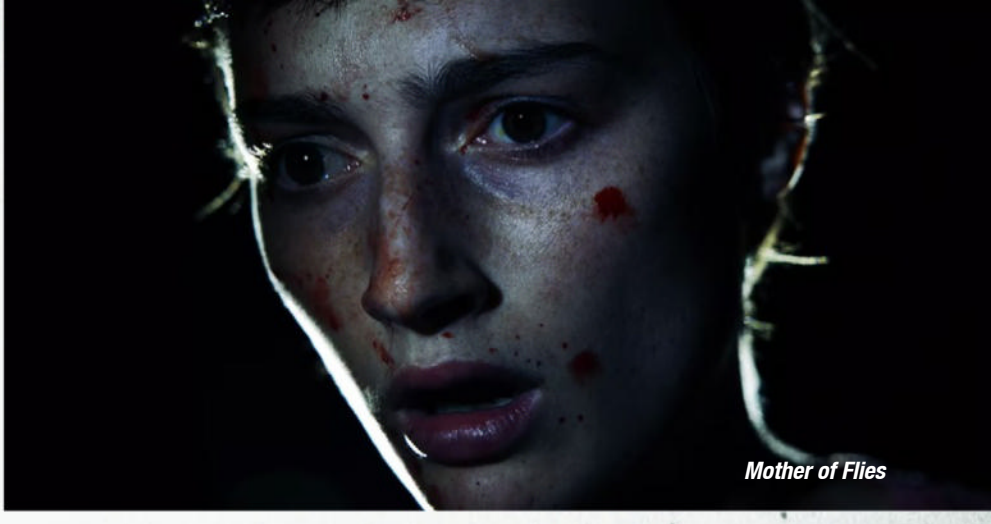
Whistle wears its influences on its emo tattoo sleeve, which is a generous way of saying that it's brazenly similar to countless other high-school horrors from the last five decades. That isn't necessarily a criticism though, and in a landscape of "elevated" horror, its affectionate homage of the beloved generic is a fun diversion. Besides, it's hard to be down on a movie where a teacher called "Mr. Craven" smokes Cronenberg brand cigarettes.

Troubled teen Chrys (short for Chrysanthemum) starts a new school after a spell in rehab and immediately finds an Aztec death whistle in her locker, left there by its deceased previous owner Mason, who mysteriously burned up on the basketball court. The whistle is blown twice – during a *Breakfast Club*-type detention scene and a pool party – and the result is an early death sentence for Chrys and her new gang. A gnarly industrial accident, rapid-onset stage four lung cancer, a flesh-twisting freeway pileup… this is one uniquely unlucky peer group.

So yes, it's *Final Destination* with a Meso-american gimmick and, inevitably, its own Bludworth in Michelle Fairley's antiquarian Grandma Raymore for two Basil Exposition scenes. Director Corin Hardy (Irish indie *The Hallow*, *Conjuring* franchise entry *The Nun*) turns out some cool horror production design, such as the monkey skull-ish whistle itself, the heavily illustrated book of Central American folklore that a character flips through, and the small-town harvest festival Halloween horror maze that must cost most of the town's annual budget to construct every year. Screenwriter Owen Egerton ticks all the story boxes you'd expect, but for all the

surface familiarity there are intriguing wrinkles. The cast are great – particularly Dafne Keen's prickly Chrys and Nick Frost's amusing Craven: a professor of… something-or-other that usefully includes Mayan artifacts. And tonally, *Whistle* juggles light-touch thrills and gnarly set pieces with a morose doominess that's impressively wedded to a choose-life philosophy and a queer romance. Death is both unavoidable and easy, the film suggests, but it's deciding to live that's complicated.

OWEN WILLIAMS


Mother of Flies

HEX APPEAL

MOTHER OF FLIES

Starring Toby Poser, John Adams and Zelda Adams
Written and directed by John Adams, Zelda Adams and Toby Poser
Shudder

Fresh from their Serbian detour into environmental creature fare with 2024's *Hell Hole*, the Adams Family are firmly back in their Catskills-based familial folk horror wheelhouse with *Mother of Flies*, a witchy idyll with the beauty and rot of death and buried secrets shooting through like sharp roots cracking unforgiving rocks.

Mickey (Zelda Adams) is a young woman dealing with a dire diagnosis. Fighting against a stubborn tumour the size of an apple in her gut, she travels with her father Jake (John Adams) to the remote woods to seek the help of a witch, Solveig (Toby Poser), hoping to find a cure where traditional medicine has failed. Solveig is… mostly hospitable, providing beds of moss and "meals" of various plants and fungi from the surrounding area for her guests, but they stay at the promise that Mickey will be fully free of her ailment in a matter of days. However, as the hours wear on, Jake's skepticism and Mickey's desperation create fissures between the two that may distract them from the fact that Solveig is not exactly as she appears.

In *Mother of Flies*, there's a sense that we're watching the Adamses reconnect with the things that make their brand of independent fright cinema so magical. The woods of their upstate New York milieu have never appeared so wild or verdant, and the only thing that remains more impressive than the family's knack for finding the most cinematic of critter remains is the never anything less than unforgettably grotesque FX work of Trey Lindsay.

The film is less ambitious on its face than their sensational 2023 folk-metal *Frankenstein* riff *Where the Devil Roams*, but this is an elemental, elegantly simple tale that reveals its layers slowly and revels in the performance of Poser, whose earth-mother energy is at full power even as she draws from previously untapped wells of pain that suffuse *Mother of Flies* with its own lingering flavour of black dread.

Returning to your roots can be scary, but after taking fitful baby steps outside their comfort zone with *Hell Hole*, *Mother of Flies* is a welcome return-to-form for the Adamses – as cozy as a blanket of mossy, sun-warmed dirt over a shallow grave.

ROCCO T. THOMPSON

BLOODSUCKERS IN BLUE

NIGHT PATROL

Starring Jermaine Fowler, Justin Long and RJ Cyler
Directed by Ryan Prows
Written by Tim Cairo, Jake Gibson and Shaye Ogbonna
Shudder

You know those movies that leave you undecided whether to applaud their lofty ambitions or facepalm yourself into a concussion while the plot crashes and burns? Here comes another and, as usual, the frustrating part is that the concept – cops vs. gangstas vs. vampires – isn't without potential.

As if life in South Central LA wasn't complicated enough, *Night Patrol* pits Bloods and Crips against a cabal of renegade racist cops who seem to be united by more than the usual serve-and-protect mandate. Caught in the middle are two officers (one ex-military and one ex-gang member, portrayed by Justin Long and Jermaine Fowler, respectively) with unresolved daddy issues and a young Crip (RJ Cyler) with (wait for it!) unresolved daddy issues and growing suspicions that the LAPD's gang unit may be crawling with nosferati.

That director Ryan Prows (2017's delightful *Lowlife*) and his design and tech collaborators have mad skillz is not up for debate – it's a very good-looking film and the money shots (most of which involve spectacular violence) are plentiful. Likewise, performances are strong throughout, but while the human drama unfolds, the supernatural element of the storyline takes way too long to get off the ground, ultimately coming off as arbitrary and ill-advised. Eventually, earthly concerns are abandoned and we're just watching *Blade*, *Colors*, *Sinners*, and *Boyz n the Hood* all drunkenly kicking the shit out of each other – and not in a good way. Complicating matters further, the final act's climactic sequence stops dead in its tracks so that five gangbangers can take time out for a sub-Tarantino debate over undead-dispatching protocols. ("Is it demons or lizard men?" "Naw, nigga, they vampires!" Seriously, that exchange happens.)

A valiant effort, for sure, but no donut.

JOHN W. BOWEN

MADS AND THE MONSTER

DUST BUNNY

Starring Mads Mikkelsen, Sophie Sloan and Sigourney Weaver
Written and directed by Bryan Fuller
Roadside Attractions

It may be a surprise to learn that *Dust Bunny* is the very first feature film for writer/director Bryan (*Hannibal*, *American Gods*) Fuller. What's not surprising to anyone familiar with his work is that it's an inventive and kinetic confection. Eight-year-old Aurora (Sophie Sloan, in a stellar breakout performance) approaches her neighbour, assassin "Resident 5B" (*Hannibal*'s Mads Mikkelsen), with a job offer: kill the monster under her bed that ate her parents. The premise by itself is elevator-pitch perfection but it's the execution that matters and Fuller does so with trademark panache. Vibrant in colour, sly in humour, and delivered by a cast who understood the assignment.

Mikkelsen's reluctant white knight and Sloan's precocious ward form an alliance and prepare to

OVERLOOKED, FORGOTTEN AND DISMISSED

THIS ISSUE: LANCE ACHES FOR ANTHOLOGIES

PENTAGRAM SNACK PACK

UNDERNEATH: AN ANTHOLOGY OF TERROR

Darkside Releasing

By their very nature, anthologies aren't for everyone. No matter what the plot, theme, or premise (or lack thereof), they usually get filed as "some-worked-others-didn't," even if we can't quite agree what entry goes where. I admit, I hadn't heard of this Canadian outing before but thought I'd give it a try, so I put down my poutine and slapped it onto the TV. The five chapters presented swirl around the idea of demonic possession – fighting it, watching it take control, and finally, succumbing to it. Though at times these tales come off as a serial killer's demented dreams and deepest fantasies, overall *Underneath* boasts an assortment of competently crafted episodes that boast a frenetic soundtrack and employ actors who appear to actually care about technique. Even so, I don't really recommend this as the kind of movie you want to take in on a first date – unless you plan on killing them afterwards.

BODY COUNT: 6

BEST MEAL TO HAVE WHILE WATCHING: Kraft Dinner 'n' maple syrup

TALES FROM THE CRYPTIC

RUFUS

World Domination Pictures

We all have that one person in our lives who just won't stop jabbering. As much as you plead with them to quit with the storytelling, they just keep hammering away with unsolicited tales of sex, betrayal, and death. That's the conceit behind this twisted set of tales spewed by a raunchy raconteur who goes by the handle "Rufus." Whether he's unspooling a yarn about vegetative patients trapped in a horrible hospital, a drunk mortician, a maniacal mental patient, or a lesbian couple with the oddest pet you've ever seen, his sordid stories just keep coming! Filmed for the price of Coney Island candy floss and starring reformed drug kingpin "Freeway" Ricky Ross, this twisted set of tales is demented at best and woefully off-kilter at worst. You'll feel like you've woken up from the worst bender of your life if you make it through. Barf bag not included!

BODY COUNT: 6

BEST MEAL TO HAVE WHILE WATCHING: Hotdogs 'n' heroin

COLLECTED CARNAGE

AN HORROR ANTHOLOGY

Indie Rak Productions

This French offering opens with a literal splat when a slimy creature explodes from a guy's head as he lays in bed with his wife. From that point on, *An Horror Anthology* only gets better as it follows a couple who wander into a seedy biker bar and have to fight their way through the murderers and rapists inhabiting it – only to face a much deadlier threat outside. By far, the best story in the collection is about a washed-up horror writer who returns to her country home hoping for some inspiration to help her pen her next bestseller. While there, she believes that she's being stalked by a sadistic killer… or losing her mind. Either way the blood starts spraying, the body count mounts, and her new book will kick ass! Cleverly filmed on a miniscule budget, *An Horror Anthology* is the kind of fun and gory compendium that'll leave you wanting more!

BODY COUNT: 7

BEST MEAL TO HAVE WHILE WATCHING: Champagne 'n' crepes

LAST CHANCE LANCE

face the monster in her apartment, as well as assassins dispatched to eliminate Aurora (including *Late Night with the Devil*'s David Dastmalchian) by 5B's handler, Laverne (Sigourney Weaver). Concerned about her hired gun's newly heroic leanings and openly contemptuous of the interloping child, Weaver balances a role that's emotionally distant and quietly unhinged, successfully stealing every scene she's in. Rounding out the cast are great supporting turns by Rebecca Henderson (*Westworld*) and Sheila Atim (the upcoming *The Vampire Lestat*).

But what about the monster in this monster movie, you ask? The titular beastie, designed by illustrator Jon Wayshak, is brought to life by a deft combination of practical FX and artistically applied uncanny valley CGI and, without spoiling anything, it's wonderful. Its predatory movement under the floorboards, causing wood to ripple and fall back into place like water, is a clever and visually inventive homage to *Jaws* and *Tremors*. It's also legitimately creepy.

Ultimately, Bryan Fuller has made the leap to features with a personalized love letter to the Amblin films of the '80s and he nails the landing. Like the peak Spielberg-era films that inspired it, *Dust Bunny* is also "suitable for all ages" (despite an inexplicably applied MPAA R-rating). It's a cinematic children's book gone bonkers and a spirited bookend to one of the best years in horror cinema.

RON MCKENZIE

PARTY 'TIL YOU PERISH

NEW FEARS EVE

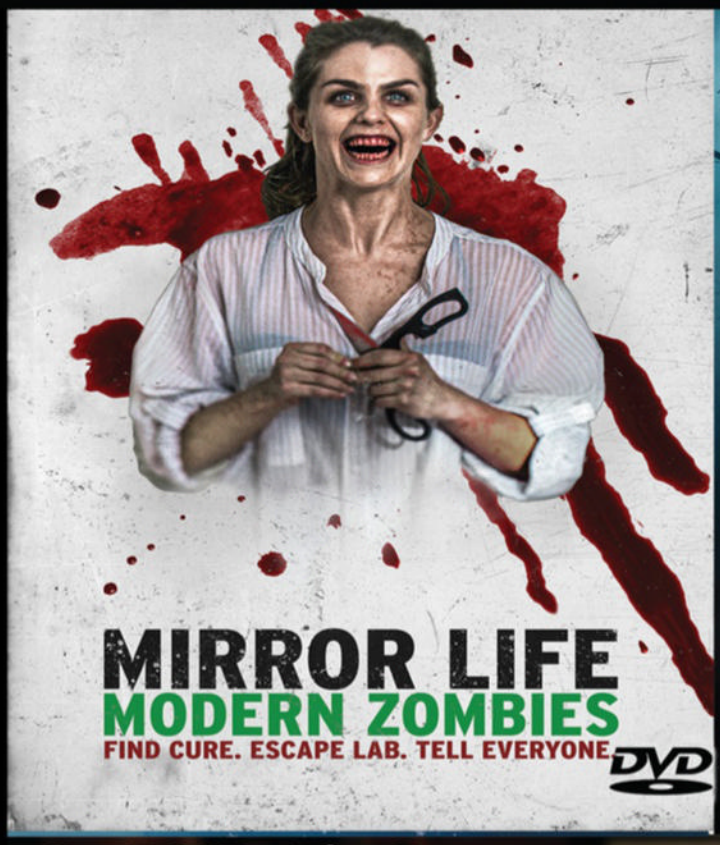
Starring Lily Claire Harvey, Turner Vaughn and Matthew Tichenor
Directed by P.J. Starks and Eric Huskisson
Written by P.J. Starks
Cineverse

When a movie pays visual homage to *The Burning* and *Friday the 13th: A New Beginning* within its first minute, you know what's coming for the next 93. That's confirmed later when a character remarks that the villain's costuming is "very '90s straight-to-video horror," setting the stage for an indie slasher homage littered with as many in-jokes as it has corpses – and that's a lot.

New Fears Eve is set in and around Kentucky's Hooper Industries, Inc., a company whose product is unclear other than to provide numerous targets for a marauding maniac known as "The Doctor." His aforementioned outfit is pretty impressive: all black with a top hat and makeshift plague doctor mask with neon-rimmed eyes. Having claimed multiple victims in West Virginia during a prologue that sets the splattery tone, he sets his sights on Hooper Industries just as boss John Dugan (Dave Sheridan) is preparing to figuratively gut its staff right before the company's New Year's Eve party. Other familiar genre faces in the cast include Felissa Rose and Hannah Fierman, though our final girl is Leslie, played by Lily Claire Harvey, who provides an appealing centre amidst all the horror and horndoggery around her.

None of *New Fears Eve* is in-

New Horror from Cleopatra!



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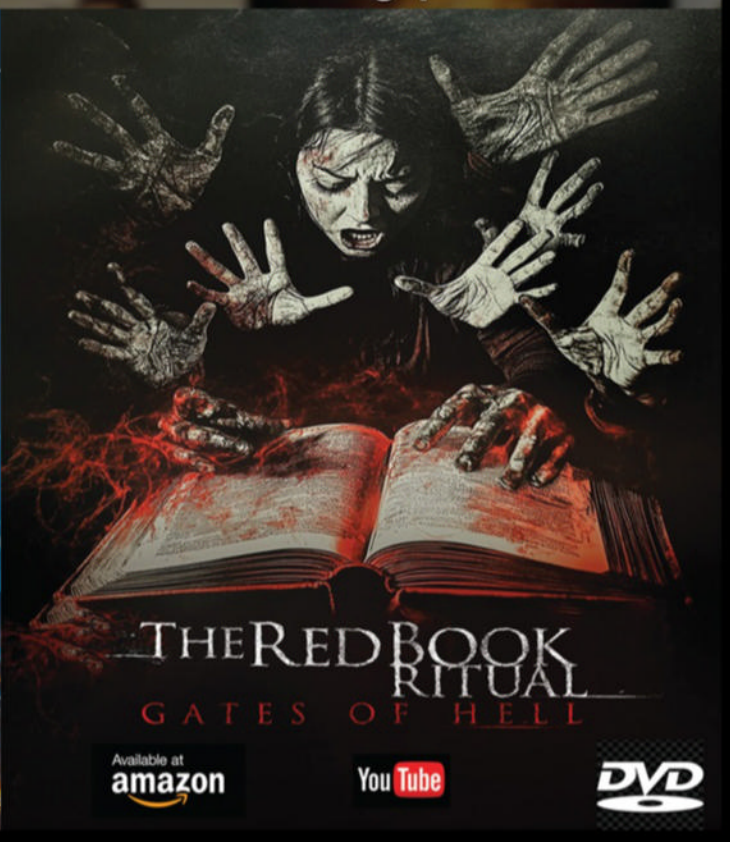

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MVD

ON THE SLAB: IN THE NAME OF ONE'S ART

LOOK CLOSER

4:41 mins/YouTube via Tyson Edwards' Channel

This tight short film begins simply enough with a young painter (Thompson Sewell) labouring over a still-life painting in the middle of the night. Exhausted, he takes a moment to rest his eyes, only to find that his work has been inexplicably replaced by a mysterious canvas-sized package. At the behest of the accompanying tag that beckons him to "look closer," he unwraps it to find the most disturbing piece of art he has ever seen, and things only get worse from there. North Carolina native Tyson Edwards has not only crafted one of the most effective creepers in recent years, he also managed to do it within a mere five minutes of screen time. *Look Closer* was conceived after Edwards found a creepy unsigned clown painting by the side of the road, which only adds to its lore. This short makes great use of calculated camerawork, sparse sound design, and macabre artwork courtesy of artist Mackie Jackson and is sure to get you in the end. Edwards is currently working on his next project, a horror comedy called *In the Weeds*.

THE PENCIL

10:24 mins/YouTube via Thomas Schultz's Channel

Struggling artist Sara (Mika Saruar) takes a day trip to the mountains of her native Kazakhstan to paint the beautiful landscape. While there, she discovers a box containing a crude pencil, as if freshly carved from a tree branch. Upon finding it in her pocket while sketching later on, Sara discovers that whatever she draws with the pencil materializes moments later. At first, it creates innocuous items such as fruit, but things quickly go south when her nephew gets a hold of this magical item. Made by the husband-and-wife team of Thomas and Madina Schultz, *The Pencil* is a strong piece of work that's even more impressive due to being shot in three days while the pair were vacationing in Kazakhstan. Inspired by the early works of David F. Sandberg and Andy Muschietti, as well as lesser-known Asian folklore (at least in the West), *The Pencil* is a refreshingly unique take on the old adage "be careful what you wish for."

MORA

12:05 mins/Vimeo via Sam Evenson's Channel

Cody (Tim Torre) is a disillusioned artist being squeezed out of his profession by the advent of AI art generation, so he figures that if he can't beat 'em, he may as well join 'em. After tumbling down a Reddit rabbit hole, he stumbles across the urban legend of Mora – a scarred and deformed woman that repeatedly shows up in images surrounding death and suffering, a curious repetition that AI is not programmed to do. Cody obsesses over discovering the exact prompts to conjure her, severely underestimating the consequences of these actions. A possible take on the online phenomenon known as "Loab," *Mora* is a provocative depiction of the technophobia popularized by the J-horror craze and despite the artificial nature of the imagery, the effect is decidedly visceral. Like it or not, AI is here to stay, and *Mora* serves as a cautionary tale about summoning the ghost in the machine.

JAY CLARKE

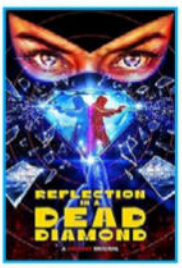
tended to be taken seriously, and most of the characters are jerks, the better for the audience to enjoy their gruesome fates. The Doctor uses every prop imaginable as a murder weapon (including a sex toy in one amusing moment), and there's a side trip to a *Saw*-esque death-trap warehouse to boost the body count even higher. Gorehounds will definitely be sated, and those who enjoy meta humour will appreciate the many genre references and discussions that make up about half the dialogue (raunchy banter comprises the other half). There's even a scene where a few of the principals talk about other New Year's-set frightfests, and in that limited pantheon, *New Fears Eve* definitely sets the bar high for bloodshed.

KEN MICHAELS

THE SPY WHO SHREDDED ME

REFLECTION IN A DEAD DIAMOND

Starring Fabio Testi, Monon Beuchot and Yannick Renier
Written and directed by Hélène Cattet and Bruno Forzani
Shudder



If you know Hélène Cattet and Bruno Forzani's films then you've likely guessed that their latest, *Reflection in a Dead Diamond*, is a surreal twist on a beloved movie subgenre and favours beautiful visuals over plot or characterization.

Having lovingly disembowelled the *giallo* (*Amer*, *The Strange Color of Your Body's Tears*) and the crime thriller (*Let the Corpses Tan*), the French filmmaking team boldly mangle the '60s Euro spy thriller, which was itself a low-budget continental response to the then-new Bond films. Imagine Mario Bava's *Danger: Diabolik* on acid and you're headed in the right direction.

Veteran Italian star Fabio Testi (1972's *What Have You Done to Solange?*) plays John Diman, a retired spy (maybe) living in a luxury hotel whose past seems to (maybe) be catching up with him after his neighbour disappears. There are many maybes in *Reflection in a Dead Diamond*, as the film ricochets between John's present and his youthful espionage exploits, most of which revolved around the chameleonic supervillain Serpentik. Except maybe John was really an actor in a series of popular Bond rip-offs and Serpentik was his co-star. Or maybe John has been hypnotized by another supervillain, Kinetik, into thinking his life is a movie.

Trying to figure out a Cattet/Forzani film is a waste of time. You simply have to surrender to its stylish absurdities. If you can, then you can glory in *Diamond*'s deliberately comic ridiculousness, including a scalpel-versus-sword fight and Serpentik's *Mission: Impossible*-style penchant for disguises.

Is there anything beneath the film's glittering veneer? Is John's penchant for cutting through Serpentik's latex face masks a commentary on the toxic masculinity of the '60s spy film and an attempt to get to know the real woman behind the mystery of Serpentik? Probably not, but this *Diamond* is far from dead.

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FILMMAKERS AARON PAGNIANO AND ZACK OGLE PEER INTO THE INTERNET'S DARKEST BYWAYS IN THEIR NEW HORROR MOVIE *IT NEEDS EYES*

DEEP WEB, DEEPER WOUNDS

BY MICHAEL GINGOLD

"SPEAKING FOR OUR GENERATION," SAYS FILMMAKER AARON PAGNIANO, "SO MANY PEOPLE HAVE HAD THE COMMON EXPERIENCE AS A TEENAGER OF CLICKING JUST A LITTLE TOO DEEP INTO THE INTERNET LATE ONE NIGHT. SOMETIMES that video would be a David Firth cartoon, or sometimes a Taliban beheading. I remember some late-night deep dives, finding suicide videos or the BME Pain Olympics, and being absolutely repulsed yet compelled to watch more. I think some people would be shocked how relevant a rabbit hole like that still is for teenagers today."

Teenager Rowan (Raquel Lebish) tumbles into a particularly deep and potentially dangerous rabbit hole in *It Needs Eyes*, the debut feature by writer/directors Pagniano and Zack Ogle. Set for limited theatrical release in early 2026 from Insurgence, followed by a streaming debut, it eschews easy perils-of-the-internet thrills in favour of something more psychologically penetrating – and often chilling.

While staying with her aunt at a Connecticut beach house after her father is hospitalized, Rowan deals with her inner turmoil by seeking out "fucked-up videos" online. She also becomes friends, and then more, with Alex (Isadora Leiva), the brash girl next door, while developing an obsession with "Fish Tooth," a long-missing young woman who's the subject of some particularly surreal cyber-clips. Soon, that fixation starts impacting Rowan's psyche, and her reality begins to break down.

"We worked very hard to blend the '00s internet we grew up with with the veneer of today's internet," Ogle says. "We wanted everyone who's been terminally online at any point in their lives to feel like we tapped into a very personal place that they maybe forgot about."

At the same time, he adds, "We're not saying the internet is inherently bad, but rather urging the audience to examine their relationship with it. I think we often believe we're finding content online, but really, it's finding us. We have everything at our fingertips all the time, and it craves our undivided attention."

And in *It Needs Eyes*, as Rowan devotes more and more of her attention to Fish Tooth, the missing woman seems to be directing her attention right back at Rowan. This mysterious, uncanny figure has its roots in one of those videos Pagniano witnessed in his youth.

"When I was a teenager," he recalls, "I discovered the Cinema of Transgression movement, particularly the work of Richard Kern. Some of that stuff is so raw and uncomfortable. I got a little obsessed with this one clip online with no title, no context, and about 400 views, of a woman just absolutely losing it, screaming straight into the lens. I later found out that it was from a [Kern] movie called *You Killed Me First*, but there was something absolutely magical about not knowing [its origin] and then digging to find out. So, Zack and I thought, what if that woman was actually screaming at *you*, the viewer?"

"We had long discussions mapping out who Fish Tooth is," Ogle adds, "and how she got to the other side of the screen – if at all. She ultimately acts as a perfect canvas for Rowan to project all her worries and problems on, as well as a lure dragging her deeper and deeper. We wanted to leave a good amount up to the imagination as far as Fish Tooth goes, but it's all there for the audience to find. Just like Rowan, they're picking up clues from anywhere they can find them."

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BY MICHAEL GINGOLD

UMBRELLA LURES YOU BACK INTO *TOURIST TRAP*

Before I ever saw *Tourist Trap*, I was a fan of its score. When David Schmoeller's wax-museum creeper first opened in 1979, I wasn't yet old enough to see every horror film that hit theatres, even those that (somehow) got PG ratings, like *Tourist Trap* did. I didn't catch up with it until a few years later on video – but before that, I got ahold of its soundtrack LP on the Varèse Sarabande label.

If I may diverge from this column's mission statement for a moment, it's impossible to overstate the importance of Varèse Sarabande to fans of horror films and their music in the late 1970s and '80s. In terms of collectibles for favourite flicks, soundtrack albums could be said to be the Blu-rays of that period. Founded in 1977, Varèse quickly began putting out a plethora of movie music records, finding a particular niche with independent fright titles. The initial three that I purchased – the first horror soundtracks I ever bought – were Fred Myrow and Malcolm Seagrave's *Phantasm* and two by Pino Donaggio: *Piranha* and *Tourist Trap*.

Of those, *Tourist Trap* was the only movie I hadn't caught, but I was already a Donaggio fan and figured its score would be worth buying sight unseen (or rather, sound unheard). I was rewarded with a great, eclectic collection of tracks – from the offbeat, almost jaunty main title theme to the frequent, eerie use of wordless female choruses. It left me curious what kinds of images this haunting music accompanied, and when I eventually watched *Tourist Trap*, it didn't disappoint.

Schmoeller's saga of a group of young people discovering the horrible secrets of "Slausen's Lost Oasis" and its eponymous owner (played by Chuck Connors), was Compass International Pictures' follow-up to *Halloween*. Although it wasn't as big a success, *Tourist Trap* built a following of admirers including Stephen King, who praised it in his book *Danse Macabre*. Its Blu-ray history, however, has been problematic. Following a good-looking DVD from Cult Video in 1998, the movie made its hi-def debut from Full Moon in 2014 – and word quickly spread online that this version was missing five minutes of footage, outraging fans. No conclusive explanation for this truncation, which involved character moments and not violence or gruesomeness, was forthcoming, and Full Moon eventually released the uncut movie on Blu-ray in 2020 as part of a multimedia package, and then on its own the following year.

Summer 2025 saw a Region B Blu-ray from Britain's 101 Films that sported new interviews with executive producer Charles Band, lead actress Jocelyn Jones, editor Ted Nicolaou, and critic Chris Alexander. And now, the most extensive package yet is about to drop from Australia's Umbrella Entertainment. Releasing January 14, the slipcased all-region Blu-ray includes both the uncut film and the shorter, alternate Full Moon version, plus special features previously seen on the Full Moon discs, such as audio commentary by Schmoeller and the *Exit Through the Chop Shop* making-of featurette, along with a batch of fresh supplements. This consists of audio commentary by Nat Brehmer, Full Moon historian and author of *Puppet Master Complete: A Franchise History*, plus featurettes from Justin Beahm's Reverend Entertainment: *Surviving Slausen*, a new chat with Jones; *Roadside Nightmare*, an interview with actor Jon Van Ness; and *Slausen's Lost Scenes from Script to Screen: Jarret Gahan on Tourist Trap*.

For the diehard fan, Umbrella is also offering a pricier Collector's Edition exclusively on its website. This numbered limited edition comes with a rigid case featuring artwork by Johny "Visibly Wasted" Bekavac (who also did the slipcase design), a 48-page book with Slausen's Lost Oasis promo art on the cover and containing behind-the-scenes material and new essays by Beahm and Brehmer, a reversible poster, and eight art cards. For fans who have been awaiting a definitive disc package of Schmoeller's enduring ode to mannequin madness, word of this release is sweet music indeed.

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IT CAME FROM BOWEN'S BASEMENT

R DRIVE-INS, DELETE BINS AND OTHER SINS

Wicker Basket Case

by John W. Bowen

What do *The Horror at 37,000 Feet*, *Killdozer*, and *Satan's School for Girls* have in common? Well, all are made-for-TV horror movies from the 1970s and all have been nerded over by your humble cellar dweller in this column. Also, none contain demonic-possession-related projectile vomiting, none feature David Gayle's severed head orally pleasuring Barbara Crampton and, despite their vintage and medium, none star the magnificent, iconic, undisputed '70s small-screen queen Elizabeth Montgomery.

Bewitched, the hugely popular sorcery sitcom that made Liz-Mo a sex symbol and America's top TV mom, hung up its pointy hat and sidesaddle broom in 1972 after eight seasons. But a buttload more credits lay ahead for the Divine Ms. M, who rarely appeared on bigger screens but proved herself an actress of tremendous versatility and charisma right up until cancer claimed her at 62. Premiering in November of 1972, *The Victim* was her first post-*Bewitched* small-screen credit and remains barely a footnote today, floating about in transfers of varying quality and cursorily critiqued in a scant handful of online reviews. Shame, really, because while admittedly less impressive than some of Montgomery's higher-profile roles from the same era (*The Legend of Lizzie Borden* and *A Case of Rape* jump to mind), it affords a glimpse of what lay beyond her (not inconsiderable) sitcom chops and charms.

In *The Victim* she plays Kate Wainwright, a wealthy San Francisco socialite. During a phone call before the first commercial break, Kate learns that her sister Susan (Jess Walton) is planning to leave her globetrotting executive husband Ben (George Maharis) with a quick divorce and a minimum of fuss, on the grounds that "When something's dead, the only decent thing to do is bury it." Nope, no foreshadowing here, kids, move along. Kate decides to drive down the coast to her sibling's posh rural digs and lend some surprise sisterly support; meanwhile, Susan gets offed by... *someone*! (All we get is a slow-zoom killer's POV shot of her looking bewildered and muttering, "What are you doing here?")

Kate pilots her burgundy Bentley straight from a sunny California afternoon into a dark and stormy night that'd do *The Spiral Staircase* proud. In fact – wouldn'tcha know it? – cops are planning to close the road in a matter of hours. Kate makes it to her destination in one piece, only to find the place abandoned, save for a cat, a myna bird, and a shaggy dog. Well, actually, Susan's still here too, albeit dead and stuffed into a large wicker basket in the basement. And after the obligatory skulking about and calling out for Susan, Kate runs into Mrs. Hawkes (Eileen Heckart), Susan and Ben's snippy, ill-mannered housekeeper who, it soon becomes apparent, has a more-than-just-housekeeperly thing for Ben and no earthly use for Susan. (What was that noise just now? A plot thickening?)

Prodded by an expository-rich phone conversation with a family friend, Kate and Mrs. Hawkes' barb-trading soon escalates into a shouty confrontation. *Then* the phone goes dead. *Then* Kate discovers Susan's purse and car keys. *Then* the power goes off. *Now* what? Well, let's just say that from this point on, no witchy twitch of the Sam Stephens snoot will be of any use and Dr. Bombay's out golfing.

Complaints that *The Victim* is a bit static aren't without merit, but for my money the close quarters work to its advantage, giving it a bit of a stage play vibe. (Hell, that's how *Wait Until Dark* started out and it still treads the boards all over the world today.) Music by Gil Mellé (*Night Gallery*, *Kolchak: The Night Stalker*) is fantastically evocative but deployed sparingly. Between prolific TV director Herschel Daugherty's keen pacing and Montgomery's performance, magnetism, and just general Montgomeryness, what could have been a rote whodunnit is an authentically creepy suspenser that lives up to the rest of her legacy. Now get the hell out of my basement but be careful moving that wicker basket – it's heavier than it looks.

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FREDDY'S FINGER KNIVES SCRAPING METAL RAILINGS; MICHAEL MYERS' slow, deliberate breathing behind his mask; shower curtain rings sliding across metal rods; the rhythmic tick of a grandfather clock in an empty house; floorboards creaking under unseen feet… iconic sonic highlights of horror cinema, or unintentional ASMR?

Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (ASMR) is the euphoric tingling sensation that starts at the scalp and travels down the spine in response to specific triggers. The term was coined in 2010 by a cybersecurity worker named Jennifer Allen, and now there are thousands of videos dedicated to inducing the sensation, with ASMRtists whispering into microphones, crinkling paper, brushing hair, role-playing spa appointments, and so on. But not everyone gets it. Some people feel nothing at all. Others find the same sounds deeply irritating, even rage-inducing. Same stimuli, opposite nervous system responses.

John Waters' *Serial Mom* has a scene where titular psychopath Beverly Sutphin watches her son's friend's family through their window, eating a roast chicken dinner. The camera zooms in on wet mouths tearing at greasy meat, lips smacking, tongues working over chicken skin, throats swallowing audibly, sounds designed to be revolting. Yet, I was kind of... into it? Years later, I stumbled across a video of a woman named WhispersRed scraping butter across toast. The microphone picked up every detail: the crackle of bread crust, the slide of the knife. I watched, utterly enthralled and stricken with tickly, shivery tingles. That's when it clicked: the sounds Waters used for disgust were the same ones putting me into a trance. I'd been experiencing ASMR before I knew what it was called, triggered by a scene meant to be an absolute gross-out.

"I'D BEEN EXPERIENCING ASMR BEFORE I KNEW WHAT IT WAS CALLED. TRIGGERED BY A SCENE MEANT TO BE AN ABSOLUTE GROSS-OUT."

So yes, I am among the weird congregation of those who experience ASMR. Eating sounds (the snapping skin of sausages! The wet glop of macaroni! Is that kinda nasty-freaky? Maybe!), the

crackling and popping of chiropractic adjustments, a soft susurrus of rambling stories, all of it triggers my tingles. Some people describe it as a feeling of bliss and comfort, like when your mom strokes your hair or something like that. But not everyone gets it; others find the whispering creepy, the mouth sounds enraging, the whole enterprise deeply nonsensical and unsettling.

Brain scans reveal that ASMR experiencers have distinct neural wiring – their brain networks blend and cross-connect in an unusual manner, possibly similar to synesthesia. Some researchers think it taps into something primal: the pattern recognition of being cared for. Manufactured intimacy triggers real biochemical responses – dopamine, oxytocin, the same hormones released during bonding. The flipside is that for people with misophonia, those exact same sounds trigger fight-or-flight responses. Beverly Sutphin's homicidal rage was less camp comedy to these folks and more like a relatable documentary, one that ends with someone placing a drill to their eardrum.

Some creators have figured out how to play with that intimate audio space. The 2020 short film *Tingle Monsters*, billed as the first ASMR horror film, explored an ASMRtist's livestream where hostility in the comment section escalated to actual threats. The film had a festival run and a YouTube release, but now it's gone entirely. Every link is dead, the website returns a DNS error, and the creator's social media is scrubbed clean. For a film about digital violence against women creators, the erasure is either darkly appropriate or genuinely disturbing. But the concept of horror ASMR persists. YouTuber Phoenician Sailor describes it as "content that walks the line between comforting and discomfiting" – a deliberate blend of ASMR, gallows humour, and existential horror. Oopsydaisy's ASMR includes roleplay videos as the Other Mother from *Coraline*, complete with button eyes and unsettling makeup. These creators push boundaries to make creepy content paradoxically relaxing.

Jane Schoenbrun's *We're All Going to the World's Fair* understands this duality. Casey is an isolated teenager who films herself participating in an online horror challenge, and Schoenbrun weaves real ASMR throughout, with actual videos by ASMRtist Slight Sounds, who is credited in the opening sequence. In one scene, Casey sits alone in a barn watching an ASMR video projected on the wall while her father's loaded gun sits nearby on the couch. The film presents ASMR as a genuine comfort for someone drowning in loneliness; Casey struggles with rage, sadness, and yearnings she can't define, and these videos offer the only tenderness available to her.

Johannes Grenzfurthner's *Masking Threshold* treats everyday sounds themselves as torture. The 2021 film is essentially 90 minutes of misophonia hell. The protagonist, obsessed with curing his tinnitus, descends into paranoia while bombarded by amplified mouth sounds – chewing, swallowing, breathing. Every sound becomes unbearable. It's the nightmare flip side of the ASMR experience, the same audio space exploited for psychological horror.

Millions of people need someone to whisper them to sleep each night, and a lot of them are horror fans. Maybe that's not a coincidence. ASMR and horror both work the same intimate territory: whispers, breathing, sounds close enough to feel invasive. The difference is intent, but you're letting someone directly into your head either way. Horror fans already know what it's like to invite something unsettling into our space, to sit with discomfort, to find pleasure in experiences that make other people recoil. ASMR just flips the script – same proximity, different payoff. We know that person on YouTube isn't really sitting by our bedside, tucking us in... or, in horror's case, sharpening knives in the basement. But in either instance, seeking comfort or dread, we hit play anyway. So, turn the lights off, put the headphones on, and let the strangers in.

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IN THIS ISSUE

THE CATS OF ULTHAR
Bruce Brown, Thomas Boatwright and Marco Della Verde
(Independent)

AMERICA'S OBSESSION WITH ELECTRICITY
Jeff Kuhnie
Blind Cyclops Books

UNIVERSAL MONSTERS: THE INVISIBLE MAN #1
James Tynion IV and Dani
Image/Skybound

THE GHOST OF WRECKERS COVE
Liniers and Angelica Del Campo
Papercutz

OUTLAW SHOWDOWN
Various
EC Comics/ONI Press

PIP'S MONSTER HOUSE
Dwight L. MacPherson and Dave Youkovich
Hocus Pocus Comics

BLOOD IN FOUR COLOURS

BY PEDRO CABEZUELO

Writer Bruce Brown has spent a large part of his artistic career introducing the works of H.P. Lovecraft to younger generations. His first book, *Howard Lovecraft and the Frozen Kingdom*, features Lovecraft as a child and immerses him, fairy tale-like, in a Lovecraftian world. That was followed by two more books in the series and *Dr. Herbert West: Astounding Tales in Medical Malpractice*. Brown has now unleashed *The Cats of Ulthar: A Tale Reimagined*, co-written with Emily Webber, though this time his intentions are slightly different.

"With *Cats* I wanted to depart from writing stories for all ages and reimagine a favourite Lovecraft short story," he explains. "The original tale is told by an unnamed narrator. I wanted to write something raw and unique, and I thought it would be fun to tell the story from the perspective of the cats. *Cats* is my love letter to the original story published in 1920."

Lovecraft's tale tells of how a small town came to create a law forbidding the killing of cats. A resident elderly couple enjoy capturing, torturing, and killing the villagers' felines but when they kill a kitten belonging to an orphan boy passing through with a wandering caravan, the child evokes dark forces that cause the local cats to attack and devour the nasty pair.

Brown retains the core elements but frames them in the form of a bedtime story told by an adult cat to his two cub sons. Turns out the cat's grandfather was present at the time of the events of the original story and was witness to the caravan's arrival, the kitten's death, and the orphan boy's summoning. This cat is in turn transformed into a lion-like beast that promptly and mercilessly metes out bloody retribution. Relishing his new power, the cat soon convinces his fellow felines to join him and together they set sights on their previous masters in Ulthar.

The gruesome amount of gore in the book instantly sets it apart from Brown's previous young reader-appropriate work, though the writer is keen to point out this wasn't the sole purpose for the deviation.

"There are definitely some scenes with visceral violence in the book," he admits. "However, my goal was to blend Lovecraft's original story with thematic tones of rage, depravity, justice, and mob vengeance."

The Cats of Ulthar: *Lovecraft's classic short story, reimagined from a feline perspective.*

Despite the heavy themes and carnage, Brown's version retains a certain fairy-tale atmosphere, in part due to the framing narrative and Thomas Boatwright's evocative art. At first whimsical with a bright and colourful palette, when the violence erupts, it's stark and bloody yet never feels gratuitous.

"As the story darkens, his art darkens along with it and perfectly reflects the script," says Brown of Boatwright's contribution. "I genuinely believe he was the only artist that could do this book justice. He once told me that he considered his work on this book as some of the best of his career, and I agree."

Time will tell if the two will collaborate in the future, though it's a safe bet Brown will wander through Lovecraft's worlds once more as he believes the author's work continues to lend itself to countless interpretations.

"I believe it is because his work taps into terrifying questions of the human condition; the fear of the unknown," he explains. "Humanity is fragile, and perhaps truly insignificant in the greater universe, which is the definition of cosmic horror. Lovecraft has influenced countless writers and filmmakers for generations and I believe he will continue to do so through time. It's an honour and a privilege for me to be able to share my Lovecraft-influenced stories with the world."

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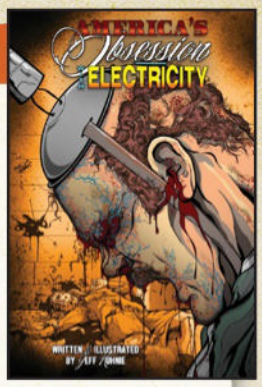
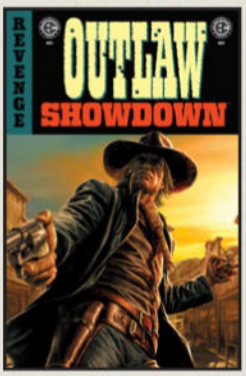
QUICK CUTS



America's Obsession With Electricity provides a gruesome snapshot of the creation of the electric chair and its first victim, William Francis Kemmler, in 1890. Convicted of murdering his common-law wife, Tillie, Kemmler would serve as guinea pig in what was meant to be a more humane form of capital punishment. Jeff Kuhnie's horrific portrayal of the execution belies that intention. While a short account of the chair's creation and Kemmler's crime are provided, the book's narrative is brief, making way for some striking and creative artwork. It particularly revels in the acts of violence, both Tillie's murder as well as Kemmler's grisly fate. It's at these points the book becomes less a history lesson and more grindhouse picture with blood and sparks flying in equal measure. It makes for a quick read but a highly visceral one.

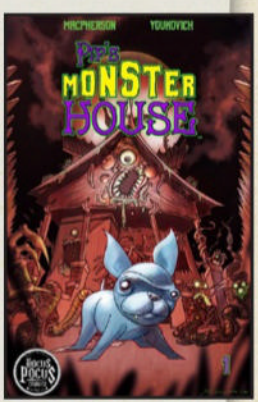
It's strongly implied in Universal's original *The Invisible Man* that the titular character's insanity and ensuing rampage is a direct result of his self-inflicted experiments, and deep down, Dr. Jack Griffin was probably a pretty decent bloke. The latest *Universal Monsters* comic series inverts that expectation by positing that Griffin was really a nasty bugger all along, and his subsequent invisibility merely allowed all his base desires to surface. It's an intriguing starting point as we flash back to the events leading up to the film and witness the sinister lengths Griffin goes to in order to create his formula. His resulting violent outbursts now serve as a prelude to the grander acts of carnage committed in the movie. By shifting the story's perspective, James Tynion IV has cleverly refocused the broader narrative away from tragedy to one of comeuppance.

Hoping for some much-needed summer break relaxation, a widower and his two preteen daughters, Cristina and Martha, move into a small coastal home located near an old nonworking lighthouse. It doesn't take long for the sisters to make the acquaintance of a strange young woman named Ida, who they soon discover is in fact *The Ghost of Wreckers Cove*. Once the siblings come to terms with their new friend's spectral condition, they shift their focus to solving the mystery of her death almost 150 years earlier and how it's connected to the lighthouse's disuse, Queen Victoria's diamond necklace, a tragic romance, and a series of fatal shipwrecks caused by wreckers (a.k.a. land pirates). Channelling Nancy Drew, albeit with overt supernatural elements, *Ghost* is a poignant coming-of-age story that although squarely aimed at young readers offers plenty to engage adults, including a compelling mystery, strong characterization, genuinely eerie moments, and some fascinating history on lighthouses and their surrounding lore.



EC Comics goes west wildly in *Outlaw Showdown*, an anthology featuring four new stories (plus one vintage reprint) filled with gun slinging and ornery cowpokes. In a special Letter From the Editor, we are needlessly reminded the American frontier was filled with violence and gross racial injustices, something this collection is keen to address. Perhaps this is why it all seems rather dour, smothered by the weight of its own social conscience and lacking the dark humour that is such a trademark of EC stories, both past and present. Stories such as Ann Nocenti's 'The Cure,' in which a sleazy snake oil salesman gets his just deserts courtesy of an Indigenous youth and a Chinese-American girl, have all the subtlety of being hit on the head with a horseshoe. Possibly the most successful entry, 'Pony Express,' deals more subtly with the era's atrocities as a mail carrier rides across the country, oblivious to everything except delivering his precious cargo. The ending is truly unexpected and provides just the right twist and sly message lacking from the other tales.

Moving into a new home can be a traumatic experience for pets, especially if said home is already inhabited by impish little monsters. Though his owners are completely unaware, Pip, a rowdy little French Bulldog puppy, can see them and wastes no time marking his new territory, unwittingly inaugurating a little war. *Pip's Monster House* appears to be a love letter by its creators to their real-life pet monster, Pip, yet wisely strays from being too self-referential or indulgent. It's also refreshing to see a dog act like an actual dog. The story is not told from Pip's point of view, nor are we given insight into its thoughts. Instead, we're treated to a somewhat naughty, rambunctious puppy acting on instinct who may have just bitten off more than he can chew.



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THE NINTH CIRCLE BOOKS

E IS FOR EDWARD:
A CENTENNIAL CELEBRATION OF THE MISCHIEVOUS MIND OF EDWARD GOREY

Gregory Hischak

Black Dog & Leventhal

Edward Gorey is hardly a name that requires an introduction for *Rue Morgue* readers. If by some freak accident you don't own a single one of his unique, unclassifiable art books (collected into several *Amphigorey* volumes), your home library must have at least a few horror collections and anthologies whose covers were laced with his grim, instantly recognizable illustrations.

This book, curated by Gregory Hischak (director of The Edward Gorey House in Massachusetts), is a celebratory investigation into some of this author's dominant themes and topics. "Hapless children" (beastly baby included) in an unfriendly universe are compared and contrasted to Gorey's own childhood (also documented by rare personal photos), while his gleeful, blackly humorous recreations of English murder mysteries and his "mutant menageries" of freak animals reveal an artist forever distanced from "normal" humankind. Gorey preferred animals to people, after all and, according to his will, royalties from all his books, including this one, are funnelled toward animal welfare organizations.

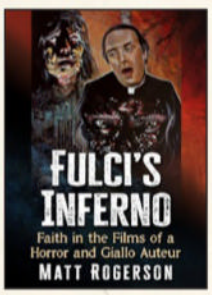
This volume is a welcome tribute in the form of a lavish coffee-table art book which also offers valuable biography and analysis. If there is one complaint to be made, it is Hischak's insistence that Gorey's "gothic horror illustration through the 1970s are laudable and largely timeless works of graphic arts, but only peripheral to the purpose of this book – they paid the bills, which allowed the creation of his works." Those are, therefore, absent from the selection, which is a pity. But luckily, Gorey's vision was inherently macabre and gothic, and this fact is abundantly testified even without his ghosts, bats, and skeletons. Even more, *E Is for Edward* argues that the late artist was at his most sinister portraying affluent living rooms and seemingly pleasant country houses.

DEJAN OGNJANOVIĆ

FULCI'S INFERNO:
FAITH IN THE FILMS OF A HORROR AND GIALLO AUTEUR

Matt Rogerson

McFarland & Company, Inc.



While director Lucio Fulci might be synonymous with *giallo* cinema, there is plenty more to examine in his oeuvre beyond those bloody mysteries. Through the lens of Catholicism and Dante Alighieri, author Matt Rogerson examines the late master's work from his beginnings through his lasting legacy in his book *Fulci's Inferno: Faith in the Films of a Horror and Giallo Auteur*.

Contextualising Fulci's work within not only horror cinema, but the Italian culture that enrobed his life, Rogerson draws parallels between depictions of Hell and surrealism and Fulci's own relationship with the Catholic Church. Going back to his early career as a comedic director, Fulci's work was in conversation (sometimes literally) with the religious organization that once supported Mussolini. As modern attitudes impacted the Vatican's hold on Italy, Fulci's style delved more into the fantastic, and Rogerson points out these details and patterns with a great deal of admiration and affection.

Much of the book is dedicated to discussing Fulci's work in chronological order, with an emphasis on rehashing plot points and storylines. The extra attention to exposition is a useful introduction or reintroduction to the films in question, but not all of the detail here feels necessary to the overall premise of *Fulci's Inferno*.

What is quite valuable, however, is Rogerson's in-depth research on the Vatican's ongoing and evolving reactions to Fulci's increasingly apostatic cinema. By the time he made his *Gates of Hell* trilogy, the filmmaker's use of *Inferno*-esque imagery and his comfort with absconding reality had been asserted, much to the chagrin of his fellow Italians.

Deep dives into specific filmographies such as this add a richness to the context of the films contained within. Fulci was a well-read and well-versed, art-literate creator who brought all of his personal and religious history into his films. He was raised on Francesco Bertolini's *L'Inferno*, Federico Fellini, and apprenticed with Mario Bava. His Catholic-soaked, Italian upbringing made him into the filmmaker he became, and it is a worthy pursuit to look at his films with an eye to his cultural roots.

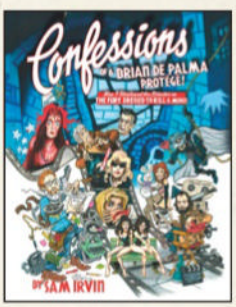
DEIRDRE CRIMMINS

CONFESSIONS OF A BRIAN DE PALMA PROTÉGÉ!

Sam Irvin

(Independent)

Sam Irvin fell in love with the worlds of myth and make-believe through genre movies before becoming the one-man band behind the horror fanzine *Bizarre*, interviewing genre icons such as Christopher Lee and Donald Pleasence. From there, he somehow talked both his college administrators and rising hotshot director Brian De Palma into a De Palma film festival on campus, with the *Carrie* director in attendance for a Q&A and a costume contest inspired by the cultishly adored flop, *The Phantom of the Paradise*. From there, Irvin gets his foot in the door for a future in showbiz as De Palma's assistant. Will fame and fortune follow our film nerd protagonist? Find out when he inevitably writes the third installment of his memoirs!



Irvin's prose style is direct and tongue-in-cheek. A writer he readily evokes is the late Marvel magnate Stan Lee with winking asides like "I ran into a naked John Carradine – but you'll have to read about that in *I Was a Teenage Monster Hunter!*"

Though packaged as a book on De Palma through Irvin's eyes, *Confessions of a Brian De Palma Protégé!* is *I Was a Teenage Monster Hunter – Part 2 (Irvin's Revenge)*. This is not a bug, but a feature. Irvin is the real star of the book, not De Palma.

That's not to say that *Confessions* is a total bait-and-switch. The book intersperses Irvin's recollections of working with De Palma with unedited interviews he had conducted with the director for *Cinefantastique*. Since Irvin worked with De Palma from 1978's *The Fury* until 1980's *Dressed To Kill*, his time with the director is not

Confessions of a Brian De Palma Protégé!: Carrie (1976)

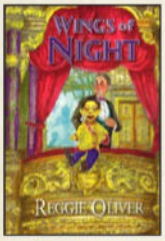
definitive, but that lets Irvin take centre stage to do what he does best: tell a few tall tales that feature him smack dab in the middle of it all.

ADAM CLARKE

WINGS OF NIGHT

Reggie Oliver
PS Publishing

Jim is an actor in his early twenties who arrives to a backwater coastal English town's big, decrepit theatre to do bit parts in minor plays. He encounters a troupe of colourful characters, clearly drawn from life, just as the whole setting and plot are clearly semi-autobiographical, drawn from Oliver's rich acting experience. Our boy meets a girl or two, and also a ghost or two… because the old place seems to be haunted.



The dominant apparition is that of a late ventriloquist and his Chinaman dummy, Mister Chink. But how is the living (or possessed?) doll related to the legend about the convent built over the mouth of Hell, upon whose foundations the theatre has been erected? Or to the shady porn films made in the secret room under the respectable floorboards? Or to several side characters who die during the novel and then reappear, briefly, as spectres? Readers will have a lot of blanks to fill in, including the meaning of the climactic surreal/supernatural vision of the afterlife, followed by a genuinely hair-raising set piece involving the living doll.

This is a work imbued with bittersweet nostalgia, narrated from the present but situated in 1976. At its best, it's a character study set in realistic circumstances, with only occasional hints of a deeper darkness in the theatre's wings. It is not so much a horror novel as a novel of apprehensions, of intangible mysteries which may or may not ever coalesce into a coherent narrative and subtext. Yeah, all the world's a stage, and while its plays are mostly banal drawing room dramas and farces, somewhere above and below there are more things than are dreamt of in our philosophies…

DEJAN OGNJANOVIĆ

INHUMANITIES

Andrew Robertson
Great Lakes Horror Company

Full disclosure: Back in the Before Times, Andrew Robertson and I worked on a horror podcast together. Had I known then that he had such a talent for penning provocative, unflinching,

DANTE'S PICK

THE BEST WEIRD FICTION OF THE YEAR, VOL. 1

Michael Kelly, ed.
Undertow Publications

When an anthology contains "Best" in its title, you expect a certain level of quality, and *The Best Weird Fiction of the Year, Vol. 1* absolutely delivers. The anthology serves as a new "sibling" to the five *The Year's Best Weird Fiction* anthos, which Michael Kelly edited between 2014 and 2018. His curatorial hand proves itself just as steady as ever, delivering a thematically broad collection of stories spanning the many nooks and crannies of weird fiction.

While weird fiction can drift into the obtuse and inscrutable, the majority of the tales here place the strange front and centre, readily accessible and held out for all to see and examine. Horror intermingles fluidly with the more speculative sci-fi entries, and the anthology is stronger for this diversity. Readers will witness a reclusive family transformed in Hiron Ennes' "Our Best Selves"; experience a gut punch of dystopian science fiction with Rachael K. Jones' "Five Views of the Planet Tartarus"; meet humanity's last remaining survivors, who consume the body of a "god" in Uchechukwu Nwaka's "An Offering of Algae"; and explore the perils of unnatural animal husbandry in the captivating "Ruminants" (by Kay Chronister). "A Woman's Place is in the Haunted Home" (Charlotte Tierney), in which a mother spawns a ghost for every way her baby could die, and "Better Me is Fun at Parties" (F.E. Choe), where a woman grows a doppelgänger of herself, pack a substantial emotional wallop, but none so much as Dominique Dickey's "The Last Lucid Day," which tells the tale of a man trying to make peace with his troubled relationship with his father on his dad's last good day.

It sounds somewhat trite to say there's something here for everyone, but there really is. So, if you're in search of a selection of strange, haunting stories to keep you company on a dark winter night, *Best Weird Fiction of the Year* pairs well with a steaming cup of cocoa, a roaring fire, and the oddly sinister shadows lurking in the corners of the room… if those are shadows at all.

MONICA S. KUEBLER

SARAH G. PIERCE'S DEBUT NOVEL *FOR HUMAN USE* IMAGINES A WORLD WHERE PEOPLE CAN DOWNLOAD AN APP TO MATCH WITH A DEAD BODY

Cohabitation With Corpses

BY MONICA S. KUEBLER

"IF I WERE TO SHOW UP AT YOUR HOUSE RIGHT NOW AND BE LIKE, 'OKAY, SOMEONE'S GOING TO COME AND RING THE DOORBELL, AND THERE'S GOING TO BE A BOX OUTSIDE WITH A [DEAD] BODY IN IT,'" POSITS author Sarah G. Pierce, "would you not open the door and look?"

Surely, there would be some takers. And of those takers, some might discover that life really is more complete if it's shared with a dead person. That's the premise behind Pierce's startling debut novel *For Human Use* (out February 10 from Run For It), which sees the launch of an app called Liv that connects its users with corpse companions. It's a wickedly clever horror-comedy that also functions as a satirical takedown of tech startup culture, "genius" CEOs, teen fads, the loneliness epidemic, social media, and influencer culture.

"I didn't write it as a horror book," Pierce says of the story, which came to her in a dream. "It's one of those things where when you just describe reality and people are like, 'That's a horror movie,' and you're like, 'If you say so.' It's just the state of our world is pushing it to horror."

Well, that and the bodies, and the indisputable fact that people are going to use those bodies for some seriously questionable things.

As the book opens, readers meet Tom, "chief mechanic" for Kane Capital. In short, if financier Robert Kane is going to give his backing to Liv, then Tom's getting oversight. Little does Tom know what he's in for, from dealing with Liv's eccentric founder Auden White, to the greater societal implications that crop up as the app becomes popular and influencer culture latches on, to uncovering how the bodies are really prepped and warehoused. Moral, ethical, and interpersonal quagmires abound.

"The world has gotten weird," Pierce notes when asked why she wanted to explore these issues that plague modern culture. "I know that people have been saying that forever and there's never been a time when people haven't been like, 'The world's going to shit.' But this has just sort of been my way of dealing with it."

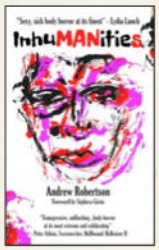
What's striking about *For Human Use* is that it should feel strange and far-fetched given its subject matter, but Pierce does an admirable job of couching it in a familiar world with recognizable systems, wherein folks frequently employ the same arguments and psychological reasoning for supporting or opposing Liv that people already use everyday in relation to other controversial issues. And so, it's only natural (perhaps inevitable) that strong pro- and anti-Liv factions should emerge and that this polarization leads to ever more aggressive and violent actions, especially once the app shuts down.

"I started thinking about where these bodies are coming from and how would they commercialize it," Pierce explains. "The body market was sort of a very early element of this – any consumer object before it reaches us has to go through a market. So that became an organizing element. And then the other half of that is all markets eventually crash. They squeeze and they expand and they crash. And I just kept pulling the thread there to be, like, okay, well, what if people become addicted to something and then suddenly it's not available? And then I would think through that. And the answer is: they would find a way to make it available. They would start making it themselves."

Of course, this brings us full circle to that very first question. If something like Liv actually existed, would people use it? Would *you* open the door?

"One of the things that I discovered late in writing the book was that I think a lot of people would be faking their participation," Pierce says. "There were the diehard users and then the people they accused of not being real users. I think that is how it would unfold. I think it's possible that a small number of people could be really into this, but if they were the sort of people who had [a lot of] influence, I think there would be another half of the population faking their participation in order to go along with it."

and deeply unsettling body horror, I'd have told him to stop wasting his time podcasting.



The six tales that comprise Robertson's debut standalone short story collection *InhuMANities* waft up from downtrodden, often urban places, populated by the hungry, the desperate, and the opportunistic. The 1980s-set opener "Sport Pig" sees a pair of bored vampires decide to test their immortality and imbibe from AIDS-infected prey, an act that sends one of them into a spiral of self-destructive addiction. Meanwhile, in "Antenatal" a celebrity lookalike is used for her pregnancy, Tyson goes on a trick for a friend in "Tyson's Trick" and gets way more than he bargained for, and a down-on-her-luck escort with a sick mother sells her pristine skin to the wealthy in "Hamburger Lady." The collection's tour de force, however, is its longest story, "Pressed," in which the owner of an adult video store/peepshow sources some very special exotic experiences for his ever-more-obsessed clientele.

Take heed, would-be readers, there are sights within these pages that are not easily scrubbed from the mind. A shower may be required afterward, as Robertson's fiction is just that visceral and grimy.

If there's a flaw in this book, it's in the notable number of typos that have slipped past the gatekeepers (including one on the cover!). Yet, it also serves as a testament to the power of the fiction that at no time did those errors eclipse the desire to find out what happens next.

While *InhuMANities* may suffer from some common indie shortcomings, it's also jammed full of transgressive storytelling that's well worth seeking out, especially for those who take particular pleasure in polluting their grey matter.

MONICA S. KUEBLER

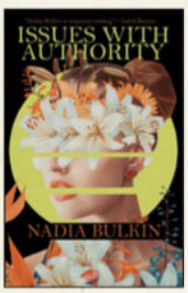
ISSUES WITH AUTHORITY

Nadia Bulkin

Ghoulish Books

Nadia Bulkin's first collection, *She Said Destroy* (Word Horde, 2017), introduced a fresh and powerful voice, and now her second one reaffirms this and brings further evidence of her growth. And this does not refer only to the larger size of her new stories, since this book contains two novelettes and one almost short novel-sized novella.

The deceptive title of the first one, "Cop Car," metaphorically refers to its protagonist who at one point says: "I am a cop car. Once I have you, you cannot be free of me." As a young girl she was brought up in a cult, then taken over by a government agency which wanted to weaponize her abilities of telepathic influence. As it turns out, she is not a victim, but an empowered, damaged person looking for her place in the world's hierarchy.



The second novelette, "Your Next Best American Girl," is a blackly satirical take on societal expectations on women, told through a body horror tale of a girl whose beauty pageant contests turn increasingly disastrous after she develops sores and other changes on her skin, also affecting her mind.

Finally, the big novella "Red Skies in the Morning" (the saying continues: "sailors take warning") builds upon the notion of a *Ring*-like video curse which gruesomely destroys the viewer unless they transfer it to someone else. Here Bulkin takes issue with authorities who pay willing victims to accept the "paracontagion" to prevent the curse's ultimate outcome. The levels of empathy in such a society are refracted through the protagonist's search for her missing baby sister.

These tales are gripping, frightening, and affectionate, but they refuse easy, escapist answers in their acute, layered dissections of dispiritingly recognizable contemporary ills.

DEJAN OGNJANOVIĆ

LIBRARY OF THE DAMNED

NEVER TRUST A DRAGON

Books were my favourite form of escapism as a kid. No matter how crap things got, I could crack open a cover and instantly be transported somewhere new. And as far as kid me was concerned, the bigger the book the better. Good thing I grew up in the 1980s, when no one balked at novels with hefty page counts. (Devouring all 1168 pages of Stephen King's *It* at age twelve was a seriously boast-worthy achievement.)

Massive books are less common these days, so when Joe Hill's latest novel landed on my porch (at a whopping 880 pages, it did not fit in the mailbox), its size felt almost confrontational. *King Sorrow* (out now from William Morrow) is a sprawling story about friendship, the occult, and summoning a force far beyond one's ken (in this case, a dragon, if birthed straight from the realm of cosmic horror), and how having such vast power at one's fingertips might alter that friendship over the ensuing years. It's also a tale of murder, vengeance, heartbreaking betrayal, and guilt – and easily the most epic novel I've read in recent memory.

When the group first summons the titular King Sorrow while still in college, it's with good intentions: to help their friend Arthur who is being extorted by some rather unsavory people. The problem with dragons is that one violent death is not enough to keep such a creature satiated, and now the friends must select someone to die each Easter – or sacrifice one of their own. Further, a dragon ripping through the dimensional fabric to devour someone is not exactly subtle, and *King Sorrow*'s second part (Book Two: Flight or Fright), set on an international flight in the hours before the dragon is due to attack a passenger (thus potentially killing everyone else onboard in the process), is a masterclass in escalating tension. And the fallout of that event, wherein the authorities become involved, is equally compelling. It seems nothing but fitting that this novel should come from the son of the man who popularized similar gargantuan tomes, and it's worth noting all the subtle ways Hill pays tribute to his dad in these pages, including several narrative references to the greater King universe (e.g. *The Dead Zone*'s Greg Stillson, among others), as if this were just another interconnecting piece of that world.

Some folks online have called *King Sorrow* a masterpiece, and I won't argue with them, but for me, it feels like a welcome return to a type of storytelling that I didn't realize I was desperately missing.

All that said, 2025 proved such a superb year for horror fiction that I honestly can't wait to see what 2026 has in store. Happy New Year!

MONICA S. KUEBLER

Follow Monica on Substack at libraryofthedamned.substack.com

THE FRIGHT GALLERY

CURATED BY PAIGE REYNOLDS

228

THIS MONTH:

THE MONSTER KID CHRONICLES OF LOUIE BECKER

A RUE MORGUE COLLECTIBLE

Mixed media artist Louie Becker is a self-described monster kid at heart – soaking up all manner of horror from movies, books, comic books, music, and art. In other words, a man after our own dark hearts! Much of Becker's portfolio is made up of highly detailed, dynamic and realistic portraits from his favourite films, rendered using a variety of mediums and techniques.

NAME

Louie Becker

HOMETOWN HAUNT

"Born in Chicago. I grew up in California most of my life. I just recently moved to Austin, Texas, and have been here for five years."

WEAPON OF CHOICE

"I primarily work with portraits but can do pretty much anything: mixed media or just straight-up oil painting. I start by sketching out drawings freehanded or with grids, then work my way through details, layer by layer, until completion with highlights. I love learning new techniques, always evolving and trying to find my voice."

DEEDS

"I sold my original Barlow painting to Greg Nicotero! It was actually my very first monster painting. It was sitting in my old, dusty apartment for so many years until it finally found a new home. As a practical effects and makeup fan, I still can't get over how stoked I am. He is a legend and I'm very proud to call him my friend."

MY NIGHTMARE FUEL

"All that horror crap, from films, music, literature, to all forms of art, both classic and modern era. I'm fascinated by all things scary, mysterious, dark, and macabre. I am a huge monster kid at heart."

LAST WORDS

"Support real artists and buy real art. Fuck AI art."

RESTING PLACE

"My Instagram is @louiebeckerart. There you can find my web store link in the bio, which is roguespiritstudio.bigcartel.com. Muchas gracias, creeps!"

FOLLOW PAIGE ON INSTAGRAM @PAIGEREYNOLDSART

A DUMPSTER DIVE INTO HORROR'S ODDS & CURIOS

DEVIL'S IN THE DETAILS

BY STACIE PONDER

SOMETIMES I WONDER IF OTHER CINEMATIC GENRES ARE AS METATEXTUALLY DIVIDED AND DESCRIBED AS OFTEN as horror is. Do, say, rom-com fans create and debate categories with the frequency and ferocity that horror fans do? I ask because it appears that recent hot topic "elevated horror" is already passé, and "cozy horror" is now all the rage. I'm not completely sure what that means but I think it's something (sigh) "spoopy"-adjacent, like Halloween-time-at-the-craft-store vibes without any overt graphic violence. You know that movie *Martyrs*? Basically, the opposite of that.

Look, I get it: sometimes you want to be just a little scared or soak up some PG-13 spookery and still get a peaceful night's sleep afterward. Personally, though, there's gotta be some real, bloody bite and at least a soupçon of trauma in my horror, no matter how cozy I want to feel whilst watching. The subgenre that scratches that itch for me is slashers, vintage slashers in particular. Perhaps it's because those formulaic flicks, with all their predictable tropes and charming flaws, feel kinda like coming home.

I've seen so many slashers so many times that I know them intimately, forwards and backwards, much like the streets of my hometown that I traversed on foot, on a bike, or in a car for the first twenty or so years of my life. After a few viewings, I came to love "that part," whether I was watching alone or with family or friends: young Jason Voorhees popping up out of the serene Crystal Lake and dragging Alice under, Michael Myers sitting up behind a clueless Laurie Strode, Freddy Krueger busting through the front door and grabbing Marge. There was a kind of comfort in anticipating the expected beats and the predictability of formula.

As slashers fell out of favour and I expanded my horror worldview, so to speak, I came to prefer other subgenres. Slashers became mere remnants of my youth, left behind as I once left my hometown behind, feeling as though I were somehow more sophisticated than my past. (*Surprise!* I was an obnoxious liberal arts college student!) But now, more years later than I care to admit, revisiting that familiarity fills me with appreciation for those remnants of my youth, whether it's a dumb horror movie or my perfectly serviceable hometown.

And believe me, I say "dumb" with all the love I can muster in the place where my heart should be. How else to describe the 1981 film *Graduation Day*, which is about as brainless as slasher flicks get? It's got sports-themed kills (the killer throws a football with a sword attached at a victim – I shit you not), red herrings created by at least four people wearing grey sweatsuits with black leather gloves, high school students who don't look a day under 35… and it's the only movie (so far!) to feature a scene starring scream queen Linnea Quigley *and* game show queen Vanna White!

But one detail that occurs during the big roller-skating graduation party elevates *Graduation Day* to the crème de la crap (again, that is said with love): the film's budget clearly did not allow for more than a couple pairs of skates, so most of the partygoers just… run around the circular rink. More than a few simply walk. And they are still having the best time! A fist-pumping, hooting, hollering, arm-waving *great* time, even without damn wheels on their feet. They don't stop to think about how uncool it is to promenade around in a circle, they just *go for it*. There's got to be some sort of metaphor in there about life, no? Something along the lines of lemons into lemonade? I'll continue to work on that one.

Just as I now walk down the sidewalks where I once popped wheelies on my bike, feeling both nostalgic and acutely old, I watch those *Graduation Day* ding-dongs run, fists raised high, and wonder how I ever found this kind of film completely terrifying. But I did, once upon a time. It's exactly the same as it ever was and yet it hits so different. But man, I tell ya. Grabbing a pie from Pizza Palace that still tastes exactly the same as it did when I was a kid and watching some hapless fool be impaled by a football with a sword attached… that's about as cozy as horror gets for me and I'm here for it.

SHE WAS TORTURED AND LEFT FOR DEAD . . . NOW IT'S HER TURN.

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AUDIO DROME

DEADLY | DANGEROUS | DECENT | DULL | DRIVEL | DOA DEAD ON ARRIVAL

REVIEWS BY ALEX DELLER, JEFF SZPIRGLAS AND AARON VON LUPTON

MELLOWDEATH

JAZZ

Mellowdeath

CRUEL NATURE RECORDS

German drum and bass duo Mellowdeath dubs its music "nightmare jazz," a genre that purports to be a cross between a cinematic soundscape, a haunted circus, and a David Lynch western. We're not totally sure what that means, but this self-titled debut is best described as spastic, adlibbed jazz, made up prominently of surf tones with guest appearances on guitar, trombone, and theremin that evoke the playfully demented Mr. Bungle performing in a smoky jazz club full of metalheads. Opener "Demon Slither" is the most surf-sounding track before it transforms into an out-of-control hyper-speed jazz number. "Omacore" and "Krankenstation" lean more toward metal (albeit with theremin), and "Verfolgungsjagd" is a bluesy number that feels mostly improvised. Both band members are female, and the general theme of the album concerns the aging body and the struggle to play music for a living when hospital visits become more frequent. Think of it as an oddball record for badass grannies. ☠☠☠½ **AVL**

TEMPLE OF LOVE

GOTH

Songs of Love and Despair

THE REPTILE HOUSE

If you're going to name your band after a popular Sisters of Mercy song and your label after one of its EPs, you're going to have some big shoes to fill. Austin's Temple of Love does indeed mine the Sisters' goth rock standard, with that classic guitar sheen and dark pseudo-pop atmosphere, but other '80s influences also make their way onto this record, notably The Cult and Killing Joke. Vocalist Suzy Bravo has the pipes for the job, but something about her power and range feels like it's holding back. The band also includes guitarist (and husband) Steve Colca, who is competent enough in delivering a goth aesthetic that evokes crushed velvet and black leather on tracks such as "Devil" and "If Sighs Could Kill." Try as it might, however, Temple of Love never really rises above sounding like stock music for a low-budget erotic vampire flick on Tubi. ☠☠½ **AVL**

PHANTOM LIGHTKEEPER

SURF

Shore Ghosts

REVEREND RELEASING

From Justin Beahm (best known for producing special features and documentaries on physical media releases from Arrow, Shout Factory, and Paramount) comes his first musical foray – a spooky surf rock album released under the *nom de plume* Phantom Lightkeeper. Not exactly traditional surf, *Shore Ghosts* combines classic reverb with heavy metal flourishes and horror movie atmospherics. Along the way, Beahm pays tribute to Link Wray (on "Sundance") and gives new life to John Carpenter's "Halloween Theme" (on "All Hallow's Eve"). "Funeral At Sea" is a sombre affair filtered through surf grinder and background effects, while "Siren" evokes spaghetti western vibes, and "Orchid" sounds like Black Sabbath doing surf, with plenty of grungy riffs and eerie atmosphere. Populated by the ghostly echoes of lost horror films and the vanished people who once marvelled at them, *Shore Ghosts* feels like a fading memory that will never truly vanish. ☠☠☠½ **AD**

BEAST EAGLE

ROCK

Sorceress

GOLDEN ROBOT

This new EP from Nebraska rockers Beast Eagle is a thematic affair that follows the tale of a witch whose burgeoning powers are ultimately unleashed upon the idiot villagers who chose to persecute her. Payback's a witch, ya daft yokels! Over the course of five tracks, the band bashes out some enjoyably crunchy, bluesy riff-rock that falls partway between Kyuss and Kylesa, but the real MVP here is singer Kate Lewis. With a voice that's husky, soulful, and imbued with dark melancholy, she wails, rages, and builds each song from a smoulder to a goddamn blaze. Still, when the next release rolls around, the rest of the band will have to try harder to live up to its vocalist if they expect to soar over the rest of the stoner-metal pack. In the meantime, *Sorceress* is the kind of witchery that will enchant fans of Red Fang and Black Tusk. ☠☠☠ **AD**

RYAN SOMERVILLE

ELECTRONIC

Don't Breathe

(INDEPENDENT)

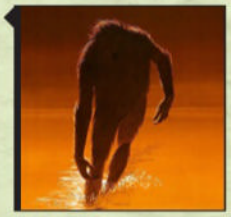
From out of nowhere (or maybe some dark cinematic soundscape beyond) comes Ryan Somerville, an American-born, Edinburgh-educated, Taipei-based composer/sound designer. With his ongoing esoteric series *The Music Wasn't Meant for Us*, Somerville explores horror and sci-fi through various musical/art projects, including his latest "album" *Don't Breathe*. We put the term in quotes because this seven-song EP is a mere ten minutes in length but still manages to range from classic '80s orchestral to modern electronic suspense cues to what we guess is a fake advertisement for a teddy bear that becomes possessed in an unmade '80s horror film ("Play With Me"). Though there is little continuity between the tracks, the shifts aren't as jarring as you might expect and the composer has his own sonic identity even if, as a whole, the album doesn't make much sense. Consider

THE LEGEND OF BOGGY CREEK

SOUNDTRACK

Jaime Mendoza-Nava

TERROR-VISION



The Legend of Boggy Creek probably didn't need a ton of scoring, given the film's reliance on voice-over narration in lieu of character development to move the story forward. Still, Jaime Mendoza-Nava's earnest music is one of the cult film's biggest assets, given the repetitive nature of the film (people running through woods, hunters pursuing Bigfoot, etc.). The score is an effective dose of retro creeps when the boggy creek monster is stalking through the night. Here, Mendoza-Nava hammers on piano for discordant menace, and in other places, employs tense strings and woodwinds. The score also serves to colour the film's authentic Deep South rural setting, and so Mendoza-Nava emphasizes country-tinged textures, including a fistful of folk songs, such as Chuck Bryant's melodic title track. Mad props to Terror-Vision for their commitment to keeping this more than 50-year-old slice of nostalgia alive for a new generation of listeners. ☠☠☠☠ **JS**

PARANORMAL FILES

THEME: Paranormal Mysteries
FORMAT: Documentary
FREQUENCY: Weekly

Horror creatives have dreamt up countless monsters, masked killers, and other ghouls to scare us over the years, but the *unknown* still proves to be the most frightening, whether it be outer space, the afterlife, or earth-bound conspiracies. Shining a light into that particular darkness is the *Paranormal Files* podcast, which tackles the most logic-defying phenomena experienced throughout history and across the world.

Launched in May of 2024, this weekly podcast has already amassed a substantial library that doesn't mimic every other paranormal show on the podwaves. Topics range from the ancient lore of the Djinn, Old Hag Syndrome, and the Wendigo, to natural mysteries like ley lines, the Bermuda Triangle, ghosty stuff, and modern creepypasta – with plenty of categories and subtopics to peruse.

Quick and easy is the name of the game here, as most episodes keep to a snappy half hour. Host Zoe Parker's soothing voice pilots listeners through what is essentially an audio version of an academic paper – clear, straightforward, and without distracting sound effects, which is sure to win over that demographic of listeners who loathe small talk and pesky prattling.

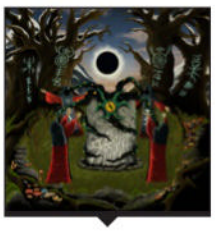
Tackling one mystery per episode, Parker begins by defining the situation and giving examples of how it has shown up through different times and cultures. She presents research, and possible causes for each phenomenon, while providing multiple viewpoints and even debunking some theories. She also touches on cultural impact and how these mysteries continue to exist in our collective consciousness. As a helpful wrap-up, Parker succinctly summarizes the information presented, providing a recap for audience members who may have become distracted while listening.

Finding this *Paranormal Files* podcast can prove a bit difficult given that numerous productions have similar titles – "Zoe Parker" is also the name of an adult film actress, so be mindful with your online searches! Best to take advantage of the pod's affiliation with the Forbidden Knowledge Network to help guide your Googling.

While *Paranormal Files* doesn't go out of its way to be spooky, the scares exist within the topics themselves and the strange details that surround them. And even though some mysteries unravel during the episode, it really serves to highlight just how little we know about our reality. If you're looking to be the sort of weirdo who knows a little too much about every dark topic out there, this is a great place to start.

JESSICA BUCK

Somerville this issue's unmined gem.
☠☠☠☠ **AVL**



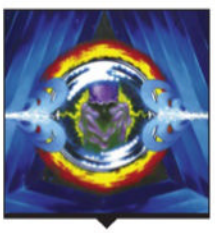
SKOGSKULT

METAL

Skogskult

BONEBAG

Doom metal is a crowded field, with far too many bands reheating soggy, nth-generation Sabbath riffs in between bong hits. Rather than follow the herd, Skogskult ladles in a healthy dollop of good ol' fashioned weirdness, and the results are all the better for it. From the very start, things are just a bit off: the riffs creak underfoot like rotten floorboards and Simon Rosengrim's distinctive groans sound as if they could well be bubbling up from the depths of a peat bog. Amid the fuzz and ominous rending noises, the band weaves tales of shapeshifters and burial rites (such occult and mythological themes perhaps coming as no surprise given the record's rune-scarred artwork). While one can easily detect the influence of genre titans like Sleep and Electric Wizard, the band also hints at outlier types such as Eagle Twin and Orthodox – a tantalizing prospect for new adherents and longtime fanatics alike.
☠☠☠☠ **AD**



MAUSOLEUM GATE

METAL

Space, Rituals and Magick

CRUZ DEL SUR MUSIC

If you're gonna spell magic with a 'k,' then you damn well better deliver the occult goods. Apparently, Mausoleum Gate got the memo, because this LP is a mystery-shrouded slab of retro heavy metal that melds Ozzy-ish vocals with the passionate push 'n' pull of acts like Scorpions, Dio, and Sacred Blade. While the keyboard-swaddled production makes *Space, Rituals and Magick* sound like it might've been dragged straight from the '80s, this album is no exercise in empty, dead-eyed nostalgia. Instead, the Finnish sextet crafts dynamic, drama-filled songs about witches, mystic thrones, and the Devil, with passion and gusto to spare. From headbang-worthy crunchers to prog-balladeering, this record's got it all – a perfect means of escape from the shitcake reality we're all currently inhabiting… or for those who just fancy the idea of Uncle Acid going a bit down Manilla Road. ☠☠☠☠½ **AD**

THIS LOVE IS DRONE

METAL

Return to the Sea of Green

(INDEPENDENT)

From the nickel mines of Sudbury, Ontario, comes This Love is Drone, a horror-themed stoner/doom metal band graciously infused with synth. *Return to the Sea of Green* is the band's fourth release and serves as a sequel to previous EP *In a Sea of Green*, kicking off with sole original number "Flesh-Ripper," a self-described mashup of *Cannibal Holocaust* and Lucky McKee's *The Woman* (we'd love to know how that works). That track is pure high energy with awesome '70s British heavy metal guitar noodling and Ozzy-inspired vocals, making it one of Canada's best kept metal secrets. The remaining three songs, however, are – get this – blog-house remixes of songs from the band's debut album that released earlier this year. Even if you are into house and electronic music, these sounds are too experimental to be taken seriously. A straight foray into heavy metal and esoteric horror would be more promising.
☠☠☠ **AVL**

DEAD AIR COMES TO LIFE

MANY BELIEVE THAT RADIO FLATLINED THE MOMENT STREAMING AND ON-DEMAND AUDIO TOOK OVER. IN AN ERA WHERE EVERYTHING IS ALGORITHMIC, DISPOSABLE, and piped directly into our headphones, the notion of a curated broadcast – an actual station with a pulse – feels like a relic dug up from another age. But in horror, nothing stays dead for long.

Canadian production company Black Fawn Films understands this better than most. They've been clawing great genre work out of tiny budgets for years, including last year's breakout *It Feeds* (starring Ashley Greene and Shawn Ashmore). Indie creators like this survive on grit, community, and a willingness to resurrect whatever tools still have blood left in them.

That's why CF Benner, Operations Manager and co-owner of Black Fawn Distribution, is pushing the company's reach into every dark corner he can. His latest venture, Last Exit Radio, refuses to accept radio's supposed demise. Instead, it drags the spirit of old FM broadcasting back into the modern world – alive, wired, and gilded with a new, spectral edge.

No, Last Exit Radio is not another podcast – it's a free audio streaming station you can listen to 24/7 either straight from your browser or through a mobile app. The station broadcasts curated music through shows such as The New Blood, Graveyard Shift, and Tape Fear that play throughout the day. Talk radio segments feature interviews with guest musicians and filmmakers but the bones of Last Exit is rock and metal music, culled from a personal archive of over 4000 discs with focus of interest in the '90s, when Benner came of age. (The website even contains a faux-history about the long-abandoned Last Exit City, where the station was started in 1993; its broadcasts are the last remaining evidence of the city's existence.)

"Growing up, people seemed to really celebrate 1965-1975 as a ten-year span when so much great music came out, especially for rock and metal," Benner tells *Rue Morgue*, "but I think you could say 1985 to 1995 is the next great era. There was definitely a slight hopelessness, displacement, and nihilism in the '90s. People felt a little lost. I feel that's represented in the music a lot and even in horror films."

Most of Last Exit's devotion to genre films can be found on the Kasey Ferguson show (Thursdays and Sundays at 8 p.m.) where the radio vet interviews musicians, actors, filmmakers, and icons. Benner admits it's an ongoing struggle to balance film and music, so the show also boasts old school horror trailers as well as other adjacent content.

"We want to build up the horror component but also we don't want to limit ourselves too much, to the point where you can only play these certain bands, right?" he says. "The truth is that there's a lot of bands that love horror stuff. We are trying to tie all that stuff together loosely, but also with the idea that we'll be adding to it over time. And I think you will see that horror influence kind of increases over the years."

To that end, Last Exit Radio also features a Drive-In section that curates current music videos (Rob Zombie's "Punks and Demons" is up there as of this writing) with the long-term goal of setting up a YouTube channel for anyone wanting to go for a trip down the MTV memory lane.

So, whether you're crushing your next screenplay or filling in spreadsheets until AI takes your job, consider tuning in to Last Exit Radio. Who knows where it might take you...

PLAY DEAD

NOW PLAYING > THE CABIN FACTORY, A.I.L.A.

THE CABIN FACTORY

Nintendo Switch, PS4, PS5, PC
International Cat Studios/Future Friends Games

It's your first day at a company that manufactures spooky cabins for commercial purposes. Your job? Suss out the ones that are actually haunted and flag them as dangerous. Properly categorize eight cabins to win.

First things first, trainee: creepy as fuck *does not* mean haunted. Cabins will roll up to your workstation in a wide assortment of strange and unsettling configurations (filled with giant stuffies, for example, or with all the furniture on the ceiling, and featuring the motionless inhabitants doing any number of ominous things), but unless something is actively moving, the cabin's not haunted.

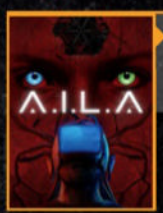
Occasionally the hauntings extend beyond the cabin walls, calling for some extra problem solving if you want to stay alive and beat the game. Dying restarts the workday, as does flagging a cabin incorrectly. Also, if you misclassify one as safe, there's no system to tell you what you missed. The only info provided is that which is taped to your alter ego's workstation.

As you might surmise, *The Cabin Factory* is dripping with atmosphere and dread-inducing sound design. While some of the hauntings employ jump scares and dramatic set pieces, others are much more subtle, chilling, and difficult to spot; the constant oscillation between the two extremes, as well as the occasional wild environmental shift (to a forest, for instance), keeps players locked at a base level of constant unease.

The Cabin Factory takes those observational "spot-the-differences"-style games, drops the premise into a three-dimensional immersive environment inspired by "liminal spaces and psychological horror walking simulators," and then turns the fright knob way up. A worthy endeavour even if attention to detail isn't your strong suit. After all, these cabins aren't going to inspect themselves. Get to work!

MONICA S. KUEBLER

HEADSHOTS: GENUINELY CREEPY, LOADED WITH ATMOSPHERE, LOTS OF CABIN ITERATIONS
MISFIRES: CAMERA WAVER CAN MAKE IT TRICKY TO DETECT MOVEMENT



A.I.L.A.

PC, PS5, Xbox X/S
Pulsatrix Studios/Fireshine Games

If investigating haunted cabins isn't the right gig for you, how about becoming a play tester? In *A.I.L.A.*, gamers play as Samuel, who has been tasked with trying out the new titular AI-powered horror VR game, which adapts to his personality, gameplay, and anything else it may learn about him and his life to deliver a series of customized playable experiences.

Let's be clear: if the in-game *A.I.L.A.* existed in real life, it would be absolutely terrifying, and just like in the story, it would likely escape the bounds of its programming to contaminate your smart home. But *A.I.L.A.* falls well short of that level of terror, however, and ends up feeling more like a squandered opportunity.

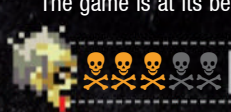
The game is at its best when it's being weird and surreal and exploring the implications of AI seeping into everything. To this end, it opens strong, introducing your job, your home, and the *A.I.L.A.* system. The first two playtest experiences take place in a mysterious, liminal series of rooms with puzzles that can only be solved by flipping yourself between iterations with a TV remote (a mechanic made extra unsettling with some great sound design). They set expectations high. With the third experience, however, things begin to take a much more rote horror approach and once combat is introduced, all that accumulated goodwill splatters like so much alien blood.

Unless you are using a controller, which improves things somewhat, fighting is frustrating and janky – never mind it's nearly impossible to safely heal mid-fight. This is further compounded by enemies and enemy attacks that feel both unbalanced and uninspired. If *A.I.L.A.* was as adaptive as claimed in the in-game materials, she'd evolve the environment when players get hung up in an experience, but no, while decisions have some narrative impact, this is ultimately a linear game (with no option to change the difficulty).

That's a shame, because *A.I.L.A.* looks gorgeous. Visually, everything's wonderfully immersive – and very, very gory. The gritty, decrepit in-game environments are gloriously detailed, and Samuel's futuristic apartment feels real and lived in. (Being able to pet and feed the kitty is a nice touch.)

If you ultimately decide to welcome *A.I.L.A.* into your home, just remember, as with its in-game counterpart, it comes with some rather serious caveats.

MONICA S. KUEBLER



HEADSHOTS: GREAT CONCEPT, LOOKS FANTASTIC, OFFERS SOME GENUINELY UNSETTLING MOMENTS
MISFIRES: COMBAT IS JANKY, UNSATISFYING, AND UNREWARDING

Horror in Culture & Entertainment

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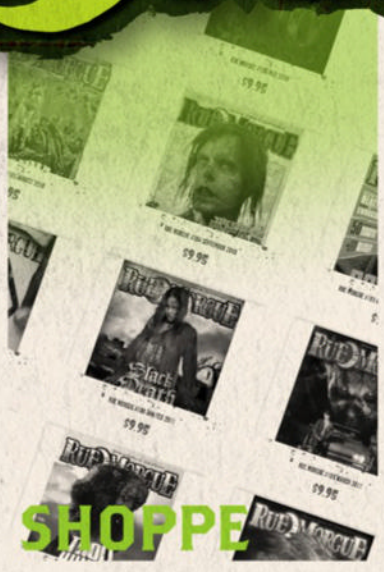

IN A WORLD WHERE IT'S OKAY TO AGREE TO DISAGREE, ONE FILM CONTINUES TO STICK OUT AS THE PROVERBIAL BRIDGE TOO FAR: SRDJAN SPASOJEVIC'S *A SERBIAN FILM*. BUT FIFTEEN YEARS LATER, IS IT STILL AN EXAMPLE OF A FILM THAT GOES BEYOND THE PALE? TWO OF OUR WRITERS ENTER THE RING TO DUKE IT OUT!

IS *A SERBIAN FILM* STILL INDEFENSIBLE?

YES!

LENA REID

"The genre has evolved beyond simply shocking the crowd with some truly retrograde rubbish and then telling the audience it's art because 'politics.'"

VS

NO!

JERRY J. SAMPSON

"A Serbian Film serves as an unflinching condemnation of the political forces whose cruelty stretched far beyond anything our imaginations could ever conjure."

There's a reason the exploitation era was an era, folks. There's also a reason certain "extreme" horror films age like milk after blowing the minds of fourteen-year-olds just discovering the internet. It's because we've come up with more sophisticated ways to get audiences to appreciate the genre, without a sideshow-esque promise of "the most fucked-up shit you can imagine" on a screen. Say what you will about "elevated" horror, but the fact of the matter is that the genre has evolved beyond simply shocking the crowd with some truly retrograde rubbish and then telling the audience it's art because "politics." And the best part about that whole argument? If you didn't enjoy the experience of having your retinas nuked with juvenile pedophile fantasy, it's because you "didn't get it." Case closed, edgelords for the win.

It's 2026, my friends, and in case you haven't been paying attention, the world is on fire. Basic human rights are being trampled around the globe, and the news has been a nonstop horror headline for the past decade and a half. Wanna talk about horror and politics? One need look no further than our own backyard for very real instances of suffering that's actually in our hands to address. The best faith argument in favour of *A Serbian Film* is that it shows how much life sucks in Serbia. But if a story must include a sequence of newborn porn to elucidate that point, then maybe it's not a point worth making through film.

And sure, one could make the old "different strokes for different folks" argument, but do we really need to give the anti-horror pearl-clutchers more ammo to strike genre material from cinemas and libraries? We've come so far with political allegory and storytelling – *A Serbian Film* is hardly worth setting us back in that regard, no matter how much life sucks in Serbia.

Horror is intended to frighten and provoke, yes, but just as *Rue Morgue* draws a line at true crime and snuff, fictional material ought to draw a similar line when it comes to sexual violence and children. Full stop.

A Serbian Film is not now, nor has it ever been, indefensible as a form of art. It isn't hyperbole to state that horror is political, and it's no secret that not all horror is meant for every palate. Some fans hate gore, others can't stand sex, and a very large swath of the community will always decry extreme horror as indefensible.

A Serbian Film is shocking, but it has fallen prey to critical vitriol from people who are proud to have never seen the movie. It's easy to condemn a movie as "indefensible" when one refuses to look any further than click-bait lists of most deplorable films. It's difficult to sit down and watch a movie that is as deeply troubling and confronting as *A Serbian Film*, but it could be lauded as a work of political rebellion and a confrontation of despair, as the movie speaks to injustice in a way that can't be ignored.

Shattering nearly every cinematic and thematic taboo, director Srdjan Spasojević surely anticipated the contempt of the audience, and he has made no apologies for his interpretation of the atrocities committed against the Serbian people. *A Serbian Film* serves as an unflinching condemnation of the political forces whose cruelty stretched far beyond anything our imaginations could ever conjure. Spasojević and screenwriter Aleksandar Radivojević made *A Serbian Film* in an attempt to immerse the audience in the psychological torture that comes from living under the rule of a corrupt and extreme government, and the ways in which it can cause even its victims to become perpetrators. They state that the film is "about the monolithic power of leaders who hypnotize you to do things you don't want to do."

A Serbian Film feels at times like a dream, at others like a nightmare. But it's one we can turn off at the end, unlike those who are crushed under the violence and psychotic whims of rich and powerful leaders. So, if a film can remind us that extremity exists in real life, maybe it can become harder to ignore that fact, and what better reason than that is there for art to exist?

LAST ISSUE'S WINNER
AS VOTED BY YOU ON FACEBOOK

WHAT'S THE MOST UNDERAPPRECIATED CHRISTMAS-THEMED HORROR MOVIE OF ALL TIME?

Don't Open Till Christmas 26% — 74% *Treevenge*

***TREEVENGE* IS THE MOST UNDERAPPRECIATED CHRISTMAS-THEMED HORROR MOVIE OF ALL TIME!**

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From the archives of FORTEAN TIMES, the world's foremost journal of strange phenomena, comes a new collection exploring the world of witchcraft...

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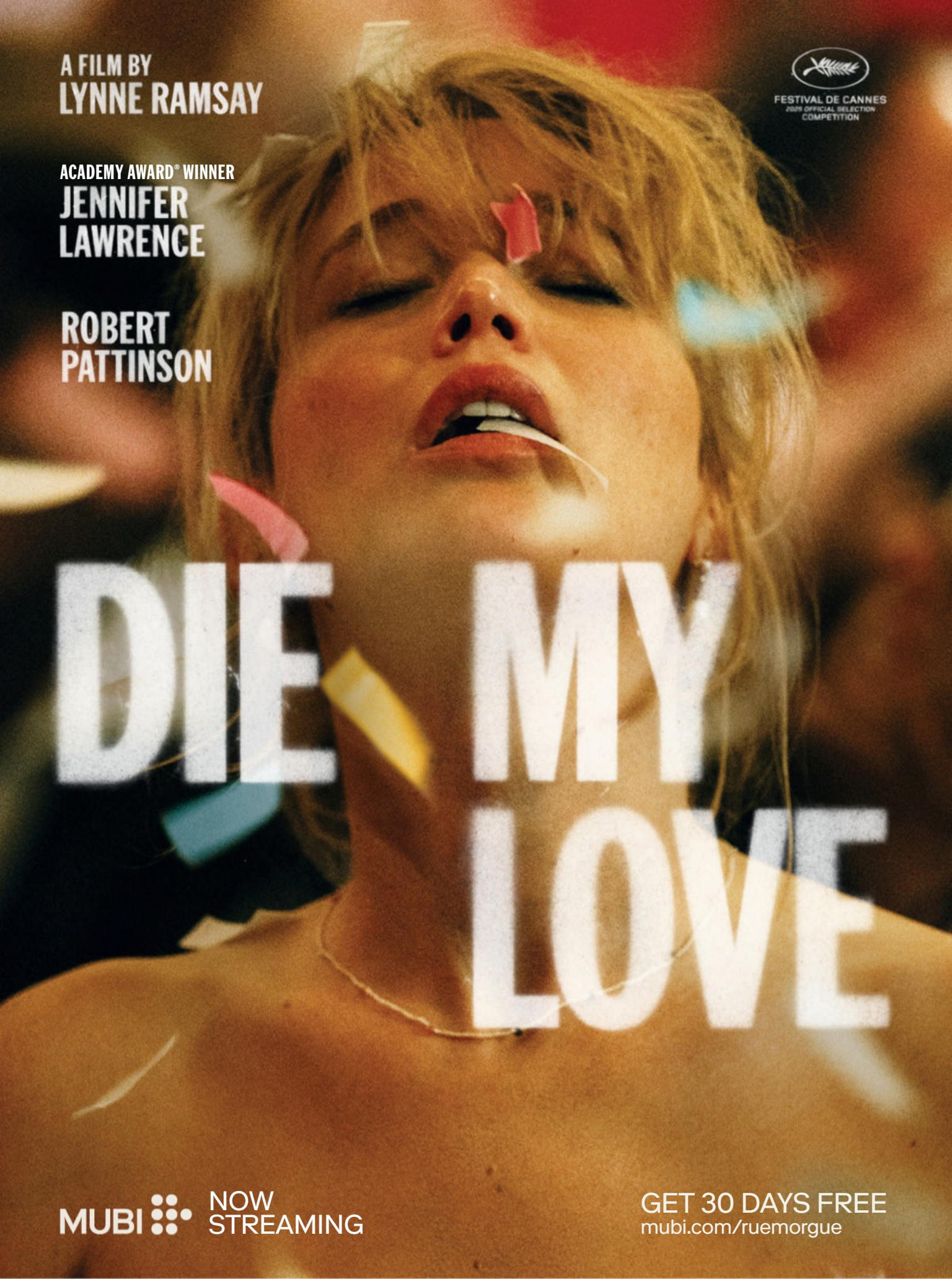
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